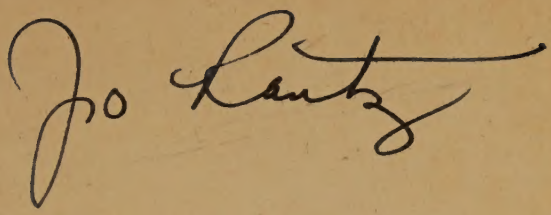
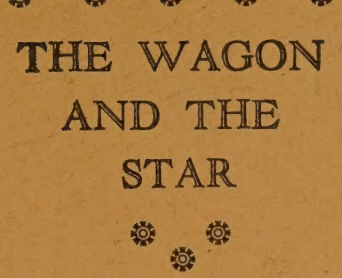
THE WAGON AND THE STAR

LIDA LARRIMORE





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By
Lida Larrimore

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THE WAGON AND THE STAR

Chapter One

❋ I ❋

IT was a bright Sunday morning. People stared when they walked up the church aisle. Eyes, which had a moment before been reverently lowered to hymn books, lifted but lost none of their reverence. The choir peered over the velvet choir drapes, whispered behind handkerchiefs and hands discreetly cupped. Miss Mattie Apple, the organist, tilted the mirror above the music rack to command a clear view of the center aisle and thus consoled herself for being obliged to sit with her back to the congregation. Doctor Matthews, standing in the pulpit with hands upraised, maintained that benign attitude but withheld his invitation to prayer. Divine worship gave place, for the moment, to the pageant of royalty.

The procession which moved slowly up the aisle was sufficiently impressive to distract the attention of any congregation. Grandmother Lloyd in sealskin and velvet came first leaning a little upon Uncle Randolph's arm. She was a tiny old lady with delicate features and the manner of a marquise. She walked erectly and held her head very high. The

slight pressure of her tiny gloved hand on Uncle Randolph's arm was merely the correct gesture and not a confession of age. Beneath scallops of silvery hair and a jet "bonnet" heavy with ostrich tips her eyes, bright and blue as turquoise beads, stared straight ahead, glancing neither to the right nor to the left. Grandmother on parade was a magnificent sight. You thought of trumpets, and pages in velvet coats.

Uncle Randolph's manner was more genial. A Sabbath smile lingered upon his ruddy countenance and he bowed to people here and there along the line of march. You felt that if it were not Sunday he would slap gentlemen on the back and bow very low over ladies' hands. Uncle Randolph planned to run for congress next fall. He was, everybody agreed, "a fine figure of a man." The collar of his Prince Albert fitted his shoulders snugly, unmarred by wrinkle or crease. His collar and rich silk tie were discreetly correct. The pink carnation added a festive touch. It indicated that here was a solid and substantial citizen who appreciated the little gallantries of life. Uncle Randolph towered far above tiny regal Grandmother. He favored the Lloyds, all of whom were large and ruddy and handsome. He was a lawyer, a director in the Winchester bank and a widower of long standing. As a result he was much petted and sought after. Yet his bearing was modest. He moved up the aisle with the air of a

public hero who cares nothing for adulation but graciously permits himself to be admired.

Aunt Dolly came next, mincing along in high heeled slippers, trailing behind her a strong aroma of "Eau de Cologne." Aunt Dolly was a Randolph, small and dainty like Grandmother but lacking entirely Grandmother's regal manner, her intelligence and spirited will. Aunt Dolly had never married though, as she herself would be the first to tell you, it was not that she hadn't had chances. The "chances," however, had not pleased Grandmother and Aunt Dolly was a giddy little weather vane which veered with every changing wind. Someone long ago in the heyday of her glamorous youth had likened her to a Dresden china shepherdess. She clung to the illusion, affecting pastel shades, ringlets and helpless flutterings of her small white hands. She fancied herself the Far-Away-Princess of many a gentleman's dream and the eyes which she now lifted to Henry Wilkins, the sandy tenor, were gentle and full of compassion.

Mother walked a little behind the others as though she realized that she was only a Lloyd by marriage and therefore not entitled to march nearer the head of the procession. She was taller than Aunt Dolly, slight and frail and dressed entirely in black. The fluted white edging of her widow's cap framed a gentle face with soft dark eyes and a sensitive mouth which seemed always about to

tremble. To Mother the procession was an ordeal. Having been reared in a lowlier atmosphere she never felt quite at home with her husband's family. She was not able to forget that Grandmother Lloyd had objected to Phillip marrying her. Ordinarily she walked timidly up the aisle, her eyes lowered to the carpet, her fingers twisted in the chain of her dull bead purse. To-day, however, there was more of assurance in her bearing, even a faint pink flush in her cheeks. She seemed to feel that, to-day at least, her existence was justified, that as the mother of Elizabeth it was her humble right to follow the royal footsteps. She held her head higher than was her custom. Her lips trembled into a shy proud smile.

Last of all came Elizabeth herself, slim and young and beautiful. It was upon her that the eyes of the congregation rested with greatest interest. They were remembering a leggy, tawny-haired little girl who used to walk up that same aisle between her mother and her grandmother nearly ten years ago. Those of the congregation who had a calling acquaintance at "The Poplars" remembered a wilful headstrong little girl badly brought up, according to Winchester standards, by a dreamy impractical father and a doting mother. More intimate friends of the family, among them the three Misses Trueworthy in their pew near the front, recalled that the two years Elizabeth and her mother lived

at "The Poplars" had been a trying experience for Grandmother and Aunt Dolly. They had not then been able to endure the child. To-day, however, there was no hint of disapproval on the Trueworthy features. Miss Emilie leaned over and whispered to Miss Flora a single sibilant "Sweet!"

The leggy little girl, the wilful trying child, had vanished and in her place walked a graceful vivid young creature as slim as a willow wand. Tendrils of tawny hair sprayed out from under her close felt hat, curved against the gold and rose of her cheeks. Her eyes beneath curving dark brows were golden brown in the shadow of the hat brim, clear amber in the sunlight. Her mouth was shaped like her mother's, less sensitive, perhaps, a deeper coral pink and quite unaccustomed to tremble. In the case of Elizabeth, Nature had taken liberties with the famous Randolph nose. It started proudly enough with the thin high arch and straight slope only to end in a saucy and totally incongruous tilt. The effect was whimsical. Elizabeth blamed many of life's complexities upon that tilt at the end of her nose.

She moved easily up the aisle, unruffled by staring eyes, adapting her steps to the measured progress of the procession, an Elizabeth graduated from college and acquainted with foreign ports; and, so the rumor ran, an Elizabeth triumphantly engaged. Small wonder that the attention of the congregation was distracted. The flower of the royal family, the princess had come home.

Uncle Randolph ushered his ladies into the pew. The foot-rest was placed beneath Grandmother's small kid slippers. Aunt Dolly settled her flounces and bestowed another compassionate glance upon the sandy Mr. Wilkins. Mother opened her hymn book and modestly lowered her eyes. Elizabeth threw back her fur scarf, folded her hands in her lap. Uncle Randolph parted his coat tails and seated himself at the end of the pew. Doctor Matthews permitted his weary arms to relax. "Let us pray," he said in a voice nicely blended of reverence and relief. A rustle swept through the congregation. Heads drooped toward golden oak pew backs like wheat plumes bent by a summer wind. Divine worship progressed. The royal scepter had been lowered.

❋ II ❋

"Hark, what mean these holy voices," chanted the choir, Mr. Wilkins' reedy tenor rising above the laboring chorus . . . "Sweetly sounding through the air. . . ."

Elizabeth smiled and wondered if it could possibly be their own voices to which they referred. She thought the vestments were a great improvement. They covered, she was sure, a multitude of dressmaking blunders. Cora Mapes, the soprano, must have resorted to henna. She could not remember that her hair had formerly been that

strange shade of reddish purple. Henry Wilkins was thinner than ever. She wondered for a moment if he still called on Aunt Dolly and then forgot about the choir entirely. She sat very quietly between Mother and Uncle Randolph, her amber eyes attentively raised. But her thoughts, like pagan gypsies, strayed when and whither they willed.

She, too, remembered the leggy tawny-haired little girl who used to sit in Grandmother's pew on Sunday morning a very long time ago. How tedious the service then had seemed and what curious games she had invented to cheer her captivity, games which invariably ended in lifted eyebrows, reproaches, whispered commands to "sit still." Elizabeth smiled again. She must indeed have been a trial. But if Grandmother and Aunt Dolly had been tried, the leggy little girl, too, had suffered. Life at "The Poplars" was very different from the happy thing it had been in Hopewell, Massachusetts. There, she and Mother and Father had lived in a rambling old house with a tangled garden and a lazy river almost at the very back door. Father taught in the college and wrote books which nobody ever bought. Not that it had mattered. There was always money for frocks and sleds and birthdays and trips to Boston.

Elizabeth had done just about as she pleased. Father encouraged her independence and Mother was frankly her slave. There had been picnic suppers beneath the willows in summer and long winter evenings before the fireplace with snow tapping

against the windows and father in a chintz covered chair reading "The Arabian Nights" to Mother and Elizabeth. Grandmother Lloyd had then been only a name. Elizabeth had never seen her. She knew that Grandmother Lloyd did not approve of Mother. Mother cried about it sometimes even then, but Father laughed and put his arm around Mother and said they could all go to blazes. Elizabeth had not bothered about unknown relations. Her small world of river and garden and hearth was a pleasant place. She had been happy and quite content.

Then came the war. Father, beautiful in a uniform, went first to Camp Devens and later to France. Grandmother Lloyd had promptly buried the hatchet. She invited Mother and Elizabeth to live with her while Father was away and Mother, timid little Mother, bereft of Father's moral support, had meekly consented. The Hopewell house was closed and the flitting accomplished.

Elizabeth remembered the awe with which she had first beheld Grandmother's carriage, old Zeke in plum colored broadcloth, the stately white pillared house beyond the lane of poplars. The feeling of awe changed gradually into resentment, into longing for the tangled garden and life as it used to be. Grandmother's house was beautiful but very lonely. She missed the river and the garden. There was a river behind "The Poplars" but it was wide and full of swirling currents. Elizabeth was forbidden

to go near it alone. There were gardens and wide green lawns but they were tidy and unfamiliar. Her cousins, Lloyd and Lucile Dorrance, were too much older than she to be companionable. The little girls Grandmother invited out from town to play with her were stupid. She had not cared much for Sally Sherman or that pink of perfection, neat little Marjory Todd.

Elizabeth was lonely. She missed Father and never in all her life before had she been so hedged about with restrictions . . . "You must not slide down the banister." "You must not climb trees." "Gracious, you can't ride through town with the junk man!" "Keep away from the horses." "Don't go near the river." "Remember you are a Lloyd," and worst of all, "Be a sweet little lady, dear." . . . Daily there had been scenes, reproaches, tears and rebellion. "Whatever gets into the child?" Grandmother or Aunt Dolly or Uncle Randolph would ask a dozen times a day. Somehow they always seemed to blame Mother who was, of course, only a Lloyd by marriage. Then Mother would apologize for Elizabeth's latest naughtiness and cry a little and plead with her to be good. Being good at "The Poplars" had been difficult. Elizabeth found it more than her slender stock of virtues could accomplish . . . Poor little rebel! Butting her head against a wall . . . The memory was so sharp that Elizabeth felt very sorry for the wilful little girl she once had been. Sorry for the

family, too. She was glad that in the important matter of an engagement she had managed to please Grandmother at last. . . .

"Ah-h-men," chorused the choir and settled into their chairs, relieved, fluttering, flushed with triumph.

"How's that?" Uncle Randolph mumbled to Elizabeth. His expression indicated that he owned the choir, vestments, voices, flutterings and all. "Bet they can't beat it in Boston, eh?"

"Shh!" whispered Grandmother leaning forward to search out the culprit. She raised her brows in the fashion Elizabeth remembered so well and Uncle Randolph promptly subsided.

Doctor Matthews began to read notices. His voice lost the ponderous tones reserved for sermons and prayers. It became almost jocular. He inserted small pleasantries between the announcements . . . "The Sunbeams will meet on Tuesday afternoon in the vestry," he read and added with a smile, "We can be assured of fair weather on Tuesday, friends. The Sunbeams will be in our midst." A ripple of subdued laughter greeted this sally. Elizabeth remembered that she had always looked forward to the notices as the one bright spot in the morning service. She had appreciated the slight relaxation of smiling at Doctor Matthews' jokes.

Strange, she thought, how many things she remembered. Nothing seemed to have greatly

changed. She might almost have been twelve years old again except for the length of her legs and the lump that was Roger's engagement ring under her left hand glove. There in the front pew with her ear trumpet shaped like a horn of plenty sat old Mrs. Bates just as she had used to sit on those Sunday mornings long ago. Over across the aisle were the Trueworthy "girls" as neat and genteel as ever, faded a little, perhaps and grown to look curiously alike. Uncle Randolph had used to pay impartial court to them all. Wagers were laid upon which one he would choose, Miss Emilie, Miss Flora or Miss Kate. So far, apparently, no choice had been made. The trinity remained unbroken. Elizabeth wondered if they were still hoping, poor dears, and decided to ask Aunt Dolly about it after church.

In the pew ahead of the Trueworthys sat Aunt Julia and Uncle James Dorrance. Aunt Julia was a Lloyd like Uncle Randolph, large and rosy and handsome. She looked just the same. And Uncle James, who owned the lace mill, had always been stooped and sallow. It seemed strange not to see Lloyd, a shining young god in a uniform with the wings of an aviator, and pretty Lucile sitting there with them. That was absurd, of course. Lucile was Mrs. Parker Todd now and the mother of two sturdy sons. Lloyd sat on the back seat with the ushers. He helped to manage the lace mill now and had long ago lost his wings.

"Lin" Prescott still passed the collection plate

on their side of the aisle. His trim goatee was a familiar landmark. There were roses and carnations in the same dull silver vases. The sunlight still slipped in flakes of glory through the stained glass window sacred to the memory of Grandfather Lloyd whom Elizabeth had never seen. (Once she had thought that the shepherd with the lamb in his arms was Grandfather himself and had been at a loss to reconcile the humble figure with the portrait of a handsome gentleman in a stand up collar which hung above the library fireplace at "The Poplars.") Even the cracks in the frescoed walls were familiar. She found, without much difficulty, the one that looked like a giant's face with a great bulging humped nose. The very air smelled the same, a mingling of dust and roses and cough drops and cleaned white gloves.

No, nothing had greatly changed. It was as though Winchester had drowsed through the years which had brought so many changes to Elizabeth. The events of those rapid years clicked in a series of vivid pictures through her mind . . . Father returning from France ill and helpless. The long journey westward. A tiny frame house on the edge of the desert. Mountains rising peak after purple peak high up into the sky. Sand and cactus and purple sage. A rough little pony to ride along the winding trails and over into the sunset. The high school. Father helping with her lessons. Graduation. A frilled white frock from Aunt Dolly; from Grandmother a check and a promise.

The promise was fulfilled. Elizabeth went to college. New England again. Elm trees and shady lawns. Friends; the Bonniwell twins, Nancy March, Hope Embree from Salem, funny droll little Hope, her roommate for three happy years. Summer vacations with Mother and Father. Shorter holidays with Nancy or Hope or the Bonniwell twins. The Christmas in Salem when first she had met Hope's brother, tall distinguished Roger Embree. Mid-year exams and dances. Week ends at Harvard. The Dartmouth winter carnival. Writing for the college paper. A place in the vespers choir. Tramping the snow covered hills. Hours of talking and muffins and tea. And then quite suddenly one crisp morning in October Hope's voice calling, "Telegram for you, Beth" . . .

Elizabeth could not even yet recall that sheet of yellow paper without a pain in her heart. It told her that Father was dead. She was not to come. It had been his wish that they bury him there at the foot of the mountains he had grown to love so dearly . . . Oh, the desolation of those first grief stricken weeks! . . . The memory of them brought a lump into Elizabeth's throat. The roses and carnations were blurred for a moment with tears . . . How kind Roger had been! He came to see her every week end, comforted her, made her feel a little less desolate and forlorn. Dear Roger! . . . She thought of him very tenderly, folded her right hand over the left one that wore his ring . . .

Mother had returned to Winchester. She had

no family of her own and Father had left her no income. Elizabeth thought she was not very happy. Grandmother was kind to her. So were the other members of the family. But there was a trace of condescension in their kindness. Although she had arrived at "The Poplars" less than twenty-four hours ago, Elizabeth sensed that hint of patronage. Mother did the stupid little things that everyone else managed to dodge. It was she who hemmed napkins, made out lists and interviewed callers. They treated her like a poor relation. If only Mother had more spirit! She simply invited people to trample on her.

It exasperated Elizabeth and made her furious at Grandmother, too. That was unfair, she thought. Grandmother had been kind. Her graduation gift was the trip abroad with Hope and Nancy and Hope's aunt, Miss Victoria Embree. She was pleased with the engagement and promised a beautiful wedding. No, Grandmother was hardly to blame. But Mother — If only she weren't so meek!

Elizabeth looked at her and the feeling of resentment vanished. She sat there very quietly in the family pew, her eyes lowered, her lashes making long shadows on her cheeks. How thin she looked and frail and worn! Life had not been too easy in that tiny frame house on the edge of the desert. There were lines around her eyes; her skin was as transparent as porcelain. As she watched a tear slipped between Mother's lashes, trickled down over her cheek. She knew Mother was thinking of

the far away purple mountains and the trail Father had followed over into the sunset. A swift rush of tenderness swept into Elizabeth's heart. Poor timid little Mother! Never mind. She would soon have a home of her own and Mother should come for long, long visits. She slipped her hand into Mother's, felt it pressed in a grateful clasp. The dark lashes lifted; Mother's lips curved into a smile.

"What are you thinking, dear?" she asked in a whisper.

"Sinful thoughts," Elizabeth whispered back. "Hair dye and rose leaf confetti."

"Darling!" Mother smiled as Elizabeth meant that she should.

"Shh!" whispered Grandmother and raised her impressive brows.

✲ III ✲

"And David girded his sword upon his armour," droned Doctor Matthews in the ponderous tones reserved for sermons . . .

There was a boy named David, a grave sturdy boy with deep blue eyes and freckles across his nose. . . . "David girded his sword." . . . It was a wooden sword painted bright red . . . David. . . ! Elizabeth smiled dreamily. She had not remembered David for years. Now he emerged from the shadowy past, a playmate for the tawny-haired little girl she once had been . . . David . . . The name recalled incidents long forgotten,

suddenly clear and distinct. A campfire beside the river. She saw again the dancing flames, smelled the smoke mingled with Autumn odors of grapes and apples and sweet dried grass. A boy with a wooden sword and a home made bow and arrow . . . "Where the arrow falls, there bury poor Robin Hood" . . . David . . .

Strange that she should have forgotten him, that the changes brought by the years should have shadowed so completely his gallant grave little figure. Once they had played together, scrambled along the river bank, enjoyed run-away picnics on Laurel Hill. Run-away picnics and stealthy adventures among the hills. Yes, David, too, had been forbidden. Grandmother said he was a bad boy. Aunt Dolly held up her hands in horror and Uncle Randolph scowled very fiercely. That was when she had wanted to invite him to her birthday party a long time ago . . . "That Warren child! Most certainly not!" . . . Elizabeth remembered the occasion very well indeed. She had refused to attend the party herself, had sulked upstairs while small guests made merry on the lawn below. Friendship, she felt, demanded the sacrifice. She had nobly refused to eat even a bite of the birthday cake. David was her friend. He should not be so carelessly snubbed.

There had, she remembered, been something wrong about David, something which Elizabeth had then understood only vaguely. Nice girls and boys

were not allowed to play with him. It was on account of his father. Zeke had told her that David's father was a thief. She had not cared about that. David was fun. He knew how to pretend, how to invent games even nicer than her own. David was brave. He wasn't afraid of things. And David was gallant. He had driven off the Archer's bulldog when it threatened to bite her one day. She had liked David, had run away from "The Poplars" to play with him as often as she could manage.

David . . . She wondered where he was, if he still lived with his mother in the shabby gray house next to Miss Phoebe's. Strange to think that he, too, would now be grown up — twenty-four or twenty-five. Perhaps he had gone away. Almost anything might have happened in the years since last she had seen him. She decided to call at Miss Phoebe's soon. Or Jerry might know . . .

Her thoughts strayed to Jerry, the junk man. He, too, emerged from the shadows, a thin wiry little gnome of a man with shoulders bent from constant stooping and a reddish stubble of beard. Funny old Jerry! His face was as seamy and as brown as the shell of an English walnut and his shaggy brows bristled fiercely. The eyes beneath seemed to bear no relationship to the ferocious brows. They were mild and gray and full of laughing twinkles. The combination had amused Elizabeth. It was as though someone had managed badly in a general distribution of features. She often had

wondered what became of the eyes that matched the crochety brows.

Jerry lived in the tumbling stone house at the edge of town set in a tangle of bushes and a sea of junk. They had passed it this morning on the way in to church. It was tidier than she had remembered. The bushes were trimmed and most of the junk cleared away. The crazy wall was still there, the wall that was a Winchester landmark stuck with glass and pebbles and fragments of broken china. This morning she had discovered a sign above the gate. On it was painted in scrolled gilt letters — "Jerry Crockett — Antiques." Jerry, she thought, must certainly have prospered.

Once he had traveled about the country-side in a bright blue wagon hung with bells, drawn by "Lady," his trim little Spanish mare. Jerry had not been an impressive figure. His clothes, on any occasion, gave the appearance of having been salvaged from one of his own rag bags, so mis-matched and shabby and altogether disreputable they were. The more respectable residents of Winchester had called him "a filthy old reprobate" because he never went to church and had been known to stray at times from the path of strict sobriety. To David and Elizabeth, however, he had been in those long ago days, a patron saint, a trusted friend and the well-spring of all knowledge.

Jerry, also, had been forbidden . . . "That filthy old junk man! Elizabeth! What *does* get into the child!" . . . Secrecy had added spice to

the joy of riding in Jerry's blue wagon, of searching for childish treasures among the heaps of junk. A sort of magician was Jerry. He made new things out of old ones. And he told wonderful stories. His personal history, related in thrilling fragments, was more fascinating than the adventures of purely mythical heroes like Robinson Crusoe and Captain Kidd. Elizabeth had admired Jerry, had preferred his cluttered yard to the wide smooth lawns at "The Poplars" . . . Poor dear Grandmother! What a trial indeed that tawny-haired little girl must have been . . .

Doctor Matthews progressed from his "secondly" into his "thirdly." Elizabeth heard not a word of the discourse. She was lost in memories of those long ago days when an untidy little girl and a boy with freckles across his nose had picnicked on Laurel Hill. Wisps of recollection, adventures half forgotten trailed through her dreaming head. Sometimes she smiled and once, at least, she sighed quite loudly. She did not notice when Doctor Matthews closed the Bible and announced the last hymn. It was not until Uncle Randolph nudged her arm that she roused from a maze of dreams. The congregation was standing. Elizabeth rose hastily and shared a book with Uncle Randolph.

"Dreaming!" he teased in a genial whisper. "Ah me! When a girl's engaged—"

Elizabeth flushed and felt guilty. She realized, all at once, that she had, for the moment at least, completely forgotten Roger.

Chapter Two

I

DINNER was over. The family had retired to the library, a pleasant room with wide deep windows and shelves of books rising tier after tier up to the paneled ceiling. Sunshine slipped between the mulberry window drapes, gilded the picture frames, deepened the wine-red tints in the soft, faded rug. Hickory logs blazed in the fireplace beneath the portrait of Grandfather Lloyd.

Zeke came in now and then to turn a log or adjust the fire screen. He was very old. His face was webbed with wrinkles and his walk was a labored shuffle. The years had stiffened his joints and silvered his hair but they had been powerless to destroy his dignity or alter his devotion. He still wore a plum-colored coat. He still jealously served his beloved "Miss Libby." Zeke, Elizabeth thought, was like "The Poplars" itself. Modern innovations could not touch them. They remained dignified and aloof, wrapped in memories of the past.

Grandmother was reading a novel. She scorned spectacles and used a reading glass instead. Elizabeth, curled up in a chair on the opposite side of the fire, watched her idly. Grandmother's feet

rested upon an ottoman upholstered in worn brocade. Tiny proud feet, Elizabeth thought, fashioned to rest on brocade. The firelight drew sparkles from the buckles on her slippers, from the rings on her small veined hands, her diamond ear drops and the jeweled pins in her hair. Grandmother adored pretty sparkling costly things. A shawl, fine as spun cobwebs, lay across her shoulders. She wore it like royal ermine. Regal little tyrant! There had never been any question as to who was mistress at "The Poplars."

Uncle Randolph sat beside a window submerged in the Sunday papers. Only the top of his head and the smoke from his cigar were visible. Mother was addressing Grandmother's Christmas cards. They lay in a pile on the desk, cards with gilt edges beautifully engraved — "To wish you a Merry Christmas — Mrs. Philip Delancey Lloyd." Mother wrote very carefully, fearful of blots and smudges. Her brown head bent anxiously over the task. Elizabeth glanced at her, was both irritated and amused. Mother, she felt, really enjoyed being a martyr.

Aunt Dolly was wrapping presents in the music room beyond. The rustle of tissue paper, the snip of scissors mingled with the scratching of Mother's pen and the crackle of the logs. Fragments of remarks, snatches of song drifted in through the mulberry portieres. There were seldom any periods in Aunt Dolly's conversation. She received, and expected,

no answers. Chattering, to Aunt Dolly, was as necessary as breathing.

Elizabeth was bored. She missed Hope and vaguely she missed Roger. The talk she had anticipated with Mother had somehow failed to materialize. Grandmother's cards were more important. She tried to read a story. The experiment was not a success. She closed the magazine, yawned, stirred restlessly.

Grandmother glanced up from her book.

"Bored with us already?" she asked.

"Of course not, Grandmother."

"I suppose 'The Poplars' seems dull after Paris and London and . . . Salem." A complacent smile accompanied the remark. To Grandmother all the splendors of foreign ports were not to be compared with "The Poplars."

"I love it here." Elizabeth smiled. "Just restless. Too much dinner, I guess."

"Not lonely?" queried Grandmother, who reveled in romance.

"A little perhaps."

"Such a nice young man!" Grandmother continued in a tone of great satisfaction. "He impressed me favorably when we met him at your commencement last June. Though of course then we had no idea that he meant to steal our little girl."

"Highway robbery!" Uncle Randolph lowered his paper. "By gad, I'll give him my boot instead of my blessing."

"Poor Roger!" Elizabeth smiled. Uncle Randolph was fond of rather ponderous jokes.

"He wrote your mother a nice letter," Grandmother continued. "Quite proper that he should. I'm glad there's a little dignity left in this giddy, eloping generation."

"Roger doesn't belong to this generation," Elizabeth said.

"Gracious! He's only twenty seven. What do you mean, child?"

"He should have worn a stock and a beaver hat and watched for returning ships on the Salem piers . . . Oh, I don't know," she smiled dreamily. "Roger is just . . . Roger."

"Nobody like him, eh?" teased Uncle Randolph, his ruddy face beaming above the paper.

Well, there wasn't, she thought. Nobody quite like Roger with his studious gray eyes and his old fashioned courtesy. She approved of that in Roger. It was pleasant to be treated like a fragile flower. Most boys thumped you on the back and let you buckle your own goloshes. Nice Roger . . .

"The Embrees are a very distinguished family, I believe." Grandmother's tone indicated that she alone was responsible not only for the engagement but for the Embrees as well. "Very distinguished," she repeated.

Elizabeth smiled again. Families were a passion with Grandmother. She kept an acquaintance waiting on the doorstep of her approval while she

tracked his ancestors clear back to the forest primeval. Grandmother, she knew, had thoroughly investigated.

"Oh yes . . . Roger's great grandfather built the house in Salem. He was a sea captain."

"Sailor, eh?" asked Uncle Randolph, politely surprised.

"Of course not!" said Grandmother sharply. "An importer, wasn't he, dear?"

"He had a counting house and ships of his own," she answered. "They brought cargoes of tea and spices and silk . . . Yes, an importer, I suppose."

"Very interesting," approved Grandmother.

"Isn't it? You should hear Roger. He can make you smell the tar and the salt and the spices. All of that is more real to him than things which happen to-day . . . Roger doesn't belong to this generation," she repeated thoughtfully.

"And a blessed good thing!" said Grandmother severely. "I've no patience with it at all."

"Now Mother," teased Uncle Randolph. "We have one right here. Better watch your P's and Q's."

"Elizabeth is a Lloyd," said Grandmother as though that settled the matter.

Uncle Randolph tactfully changed the subject.

"What does your young man do?" he asked.

"Roger is still in Harvard. He's doing research work in the maritime trade of Massachusetts Bay," Elizabeth explained.

"Yes?" observed Uncle Randolph. "That seems a queer sort of hobby."

"It isn't a hobby with Roger. He's going to write about it," here she quoted Roger's own words, "to preserve for future generations the romance of old Salem."

"Hmm," said Uncle Randolph. "Money in it?"

"Randolph!" Grandmother reproved.

"Well, you can't live on love," Uncle Randolph ventured in feeble defense.

"We shan't try," smiled Elizabeth. "There seems to be plenty."

"Yes indeed," agreed Grandmother, proof enough that no detail of her investigation had been neglected. "And you'll be married in June? The grounds are so pretty then."

"So soon?" asked Mother glancing up from the cards. A wistful expression shadowed her eyes. "I thought perhaps not for a year."

"I don't know," Elizabeth answered. "In June . . . perhaps."

"A church wedding, of course," said Grandmother, already walking up the aisle in black lace and pearls.

"If you'd like a big show." Elizabeth smiled. "I don't care."

Drawn by the magic word wedding, Aunt Dolly fluttered into the room.

"Oh, but you must be married in church. We

haven't had a wedding since Lucile's. She was a lovely bride! But dear me, I hope yours turns out better—"

"Dolly!" said Grandmother sternly.

"It isn't any secret. Poor Lucile! Everybody in town knows that Parker—"

"Hush!" Grandmother commanded. "You chatter like a parrot."

"But, Mother—"

"Dolly!"

Elizabeth scented a storm. Grandmother's eyes were snapping and Aunt Dolly's cheeks were pink. Uncle Randolph had laid aside his paper. She uncurled her slender legs.

"I think I'll go upstairs, Grandmother. I have some letters to write."

Aunt Dolly instantly veered, blown by a milder breeze.

"Give him my love," she said coyly. "These girls in love. Dear me! The letters I used to write!" Her voice hinted at amorous missives penned in violet ink. She shook her ringlets and roguishly smiled.

"Don't forget to invite him for New Year's," added Grandmother.

"I won't," she promised.

"And the sister." In any matter which concerned the Salem Embrees Grandmother was disposed to be generous. "She seemed a nice little thing."

"Thank you." Elizabeth blew a kiss at Grandmother, dropped another on Mother's hair and wandered out of the room.

She remembered every detail of the wide hall. There on a dropleaf table was the silver tray for cards; above it, the portrait of Great-Grandfather Randolph. There was the polished banister. What fun it had been to swoop down and bring up with a breathless bump against the newel post below. She was conscious of a desire to experience again the forbidden joy of sliding downstairs. On the landing where the steps branched right and left stood the Grandfather's clock with a round red sun painted on its face and the heavy pendulum swinging tirelessly back and forth. She glanced at her reflection in the narrow glass panel, half expecting to see a small untidy figure with tawny bright hair. The young lady framed for a moment in the clock case reminded her that she was grown up and engaged. She dismissed the notion of sliding downstairs, walked sedately down the hall.

A fire had been laid in her grate. She lit the scraps of kindling, watched the flames spurt up toward the logs. She pictured a figure in flannel pajamas sitting there on the hearth, her knees cradled her arms, her eyes fixed on the fire fairies dancing up the chimney while Mother read "Uncle Remus" and the fascinating "Wizard of Oz." There was the same huge bed with acorns and oak leaves carved on its slender posts and yellow ruffles hanging

down to the floor. Daisies still bloomed on the walls, garlands of daisies and milk-weed and silvery ferns. And there under the deep side window was the desk where Elizabeth had scribbled letters to Daddy in France. The same quill pen and the ink well shaped like a slipper! Impossible to feel grown up and engaged. Elizabeth smiled, rose from the hearth and crossed to the desk.

Nothing had been forgotten. The ink well slipper was full to the brim. She selected a sheet of paper from the stacks in the pigeon holes, dipped the pen in the ink . . . "Dear Roger," she wrote and paused. Surely, she thought, an engagement not yet three days old demanded a more ardent salutation. She crossed out the first one and wrote "Beloved" instead. That sounded like a book. Elizabeth did not believe that people called each other "Beloved" in everyday life.

Then the quill pen wrote "Darling." That, too, somehow failed to please. "Darling" seemed too frivolous for Roger who was tall and distinguished and might, if he chose, use three degrees after his name. Elizabeth sighed. It had been easy enough to write letters before when "Dear Roger" or, in an especially tender moment, "Roger dear" had been sufficient. The engagement made her self-conscious. She had not written him a letter since. Telegrams, five of them. But not a letter . . .

Queer that it should be difficult. Roger was charming . . . She turned her hand in the sunlight,

watched the flash of his ring . . . He could give her the things that she wanted from life, ease, dignity, gracious surroundings. Love, as experienced by heroines in novels, she thought must be greatly exaggerated. There was no divine rapture in her feeling for Roger. She admired and respected him. They liked the same sort of things. That was quite as it should be. The story book girls could have their thrills and their heart throbs. She had charted a smoother course and the flag at the masthead was friendship.

They would live in Cambridge. She pictured a square white house set in wide lawns bordered with box. There would be elm trees and glimpses of the river; a garden fragrant with phlox and larkspur and mignonette. She would give dinners for Roger's distinguished friends. And she would sit at the head of the table, lovely in amber satin, charming, gracious, admired . . . The fancy pleased her . . . "Mrs. Roger Embree" wrote the quill pen . . . "Elizabeth Lloyd Embree" . . . If only the letter were not so difficult. . . !

She chose a fresh sheet of paper and compromised on "Dearest." The quill pen moved briskly for a moment, lost interest, began to trace circles and faces in profile. Memories drifted unbidden through her mind. Roger became blurred, less clear and distinct than the figure of a sturdy small boy with freckles across his nose . . . "David" wrote the quill pen . . . "Davie Warren"

. . . That, she decided, was the effect of the daisy garlands and the ink well shaped like a slipper. She crumpled the paper and tossed it into the basket; glanced idly out through the window. The poplars the oaks and the maples were covered with snow. Above them curved the arch of the sky, clear as crystal, blue as a robin's egg. The lawns glittered in the sunshine like snow on a Christmas card . . . Lovely day! . . . A shame to waste it indoors. To-night she would write to Roger . . .

Elizabeth crossed to the wardrobe in search of moccasins and a sweater. Far back in the corner she found a tam o'shanter which she had worn long ago. It was jaunty and gay and scarlet. She tried it on before the mirror. The scarlet tam recalled very vividly the little girl she once had been . . . "Portrait of a young lady pursued by her past," she remarked to the girl in the mirror and flung the tam on the bed. But when she crept down the back stairs a few minutes later, the scarlet tam o'shanter was perched on her head.

❋ II ❋

Lovely day! The arbor was roofed with crystal and the sunshine spilling through lay in bright patterns across the path. Icicles dripped from the stable eaves. Of course, it was the garage now. The faun on the fountain wore an ermine tippet. It needed an overcoat too. There was the

school-house deserted long ago. Miss Phoebe once had reigned supreme within its vine-draped walls. Snow lay like a soft warm blanket over the sleeping gardens, the borders, the tulip beds.

Nestled against the wall at the end of the grounds was the cottage where Zeke lived with his daughter, Lina, the fat and amiable cook. Grandmother had brought Zeke from her home in Virginia when she came as a bride to "The Poplars." Rachel, his wife, came too but she had been dead many years and Lina had taken her place in the kitchen. Rinthy, the maid, and Wash, the chauffeur, were town darkies. Zeke Sherry and Lina felt themselves superior. They belonged to the family. Rinthy and Wash were "trash."

Lina sat beside the cottage window, her steel rimmed glasses pushed back on her forehead, deep in Sunday meditations. Lina was a "seeker." She sought the light at camp-meeting every year. So far she had failed to "come through." It gave her a certain amount of prestige among the bands of the saved. Lina was a brand to be plucked from the burning. Elizabeth suspected that she rather enjoyed being the lost sheep of the fold. She threw a handful of snow at the window, smiled and waved when Lina looked up . . . Funny fat Lina! She must get her a breastpin for Christmas, the gaudiest one in town . . . She opened the gate in the wall and turned toward town, a short half mile away.

Elizabeth walked briskly along the river road.

The snow crunched and crackled under her feet. The wind pinched her cheeks until they were as red as the scarlet tam o' shanter. She buried her hands in her pockets, and was grateful for woolly gloves. Restlessness had vanished. She hummed as she walked, proof enough that her heart was light and her anticipations high.

They were building a bridge across the river. The concrete blocks already were set and the steel girders in place. They reminded her of David. He had planned to build bridges some day. She wondered if his ambition had been realized. Probably not. She remembered that once she had yearned to join a circus. David, too, had probably changed his mind.

At the edge of town she cut across a field which brought her to Jerry's gate set in the crazy wall. There was no one in sight. For a moment she paused beneath the sign which announced "Jerry Crockett — Antiques." Then she shook her head and moved forward more slowly. Beyond the fields on the other side of the road rose the steep slope of Laurel Hill, snow covered, shining in the sunlight. At the top stood the oak tree beneath which she and David once had picnicked . . . "Where the arrow falls there bury poor Robin Hood" . . . No use trying to banish the past to-day. She would climb to the top of the hill. To-morrow she would put away the scarlet tam o' shanter, be grown up and engaged.

Climbing was difficult. The snow lay in unexpected drifts. Elizabeth toiled on, slipping, stumbling, catching at bushes and tiny dwarf evergreens. She did not regret the expedition. Going back would be easier. She could roll if necessary. And there at the top was the oak tree, its branches ridged with pearl, shining against the sky. She was more than half way up, almost she had reached the top when her ankle twisted against a stump buried under the snow. She fell, rolled head over heels, brought up against a clump of bushes, breathless, amused, covered with snow.

She was not amused, however, when she attempted to stand. A twinge of pain shot through the twisted ankle which made her glad to drop back in the snow again. She rubbed it briskly but the pain persisted. Each time she tried to stand it seemed sharper. Elizabeth was alarmed. It had happened before; once on the rocks at Marblehead and once in the college gym. But then there had been someone to take care of her. Here there was no one. She might as well be stranded on the Alps, hundreds of miles from help. A sorry end to an adventure. And entirely the fault of that tawny small ghost which had pursued her all day long!

What should she do? She might roll herself down to the foot of the hill but there was the field and the fence and the road. Better to stay where she was. The scarlet tam o' shanter flaming against the snow would serve as a beacon. But no one might

pass along the road for hours. Still there was nothing else to be done. She resigned herself to waiting.

The time passed very slowly. Elizabeth grew more and more miserable. The pain in her ankle made her feel faint. She was very cold. Snow, brushed from the bushes, melted under her sweater. She cried a little and the tears froze on her lashes. Time, she felt, had ceased and eternity had begun. The sun dropped down behind the hill leaving streaks of apricot, amber and rose. The wind blew colder. She made a last desperate attempt to stand, moaned, slipped back against the bushes, buried her face in her arms.

A sound, faint at first but growing more and more distinct, roused her. Footsteps crunching across the snow. And then a voice, a man's voice calling a dog . . . "Here Rags! Come on, old fellow! . . ."

She glanced up, saw a figure standing at the top of the hill, sharply outlined against the fading sunset. He did not see her at first. He was looking the other way, waiting, calling for his dog . . . "Here Rags! Come on, old fellow! . . ." It trotted into sight, a small shaggy shadow on nimbly cavorting legs. Together they turned to descend the hill.

And then he saw her.

"Hello!" he called. "What's the matter?"

"I've twisted my ankle," her voice was faint and forlorn.

"That's tough. There in a minute."

She watched him stride down the snowy hill, a sturdy broad-shouldered young man with a sheepskin collar turned up to meet the down-turned brim of a shabby felt hat, and corduroy trousers tucked into high laced boots. She could not distinguish his features; the sunset dazzled her eyes. Only the forward thrust of his chin and the long swinging stride. Had he been Sir Galahad in all his beauty Elizabeth could not have awaited him more eagerly.

The distance between them diminished. She could see his mouth now, the lines at the corners, the knot of a blue tie beneath a flannel collar. Then her heart began to beat with a queer breathless rhythm. At last she could see his eyes, blue eyes fringed with stubby black lashes, familiar, unmistakable.

"David!" she cried forgetting the cold and the ache of the twisted ankle. "David!"

"Hello Elizabeth," he said as though he had expected to find her there, half frozen and covered with snow.

"But you're so big, David!"

"Thank you. I've done my best . . . How did it happen?"

"I stumbled against a stump and fell and rolled . . . You — you've lost your freckles!"

"Complexion cream." He smiled the slow grave smile she remembered so well. "Can you walk?"

"That was mean of you, David. I liked them . . . No I can't even stand on it."

"Let me see."

She thrust out her foot, winced when he touched the ankle.

"It's swollen," he said gravely. "I'll carry you home."

"But you can't. It's too far."

"My home . . . Down there." He pointed to the smudge of shadows and the twinkle of light which was Jerry the junkman's place.

"There, David? Do you live with Jerry?"

"I have for years. Ever since Mother died." He stooped, lifted her from the snow. "Hold fast. We'll make it all right."

How strong he was! His arms were hard and knotted with muscle. Gentle, too. He carried her as though she were a precious burden. The sheepskin collar smelled like smoke and snow and clean fresh air. She pressed her cheek against it and was comforted. David, in those long ago days, had never failed her. He would take care of her now.

They talked in snatches, both a little embarrassed, conscious of the lost years. The shaggy small dog floundered ahead, neglected and forgotten.

"How did you know me?" David asked.

"By your eyes . . . And you?"

"The tam o' shanter first. You used to wear one like that."

"It's the same one."

"That's good . . . I'm glad."

"So am I . . . Heavy, David?"

"No . . . Does it hurt?"

"Not much — now."

They had reached the foot of the hill. The sunset colors faded. Shadows lengthened across the snow.

"I've been thinking about you all day," Elizabeth said after an interval of silence.

"Why?"

"This morning the rector said, 'And David girded his sword upon his armour' . . . It was a wooden sword. Remember?"

"Yes . . . Are you visiting or home to stay?"

"To stay . . . until June."

"June?"

"Yes, until then, at least . . . And you?"

"I'm working on the bridge."

"I hoped you were."

"It ought to be finished in June."

"Then what?"

"I'll be off somewhere. Lord only knows . . . Comfortable?"

"Very . . . Want to rest?"

"No . . . We'll make it all right."

The fence presented a difficulty but at last they made the road. Directly across was the gate in the crazy wall. An automobile stopped to let them pass. The headlights swept over them in a white glare. David kicked open the gate, carried her up a narrow path between shoveled white drifts. The dog, barking frantically, bounded ahead.

A door opened. Firelight flickered across the snow.

"That you, Davie?"

"Yes, Jerry."

"What you got there?"

"A Christmas present," David answered. "Elizabeth has come home."

❋ III ❋

Sally Sherman twisted around in the automobile and clutched the driver's arm.

"Did — did you see that, Ned?"

"Hey! Look out! You'll have us over the fence!"

"But Ned! Did you see?"

"What? Where?"

"Elizabeth Lloyd . . . I saw her in church this morning."

"What of it?"

"That was she we stopped for just now . . . With Dave Warren. He was carrying her!"

"Who cares?"

"But Ned! Betty Lloyd! . . . Turn around! Turn around right away!"

"What for?"

"Turn around!"

"Thought you wanted to go for a ride?"

"I've changed my mind. Turn around. We're going straight back home!"

Chapter Three

❋ I ❋

THE front door of "The Poplars" closed, shutting David outside. A bright crescent from the fanlight lay for a moment on the veranda floor, vanished when the light inside was extinguished. "Exit the hero!" David said and his lips twisted into a grim smile. He passed between the fluted pillars, tramped down the wide white steps. "Snobs!" he muttered. "Royalty condescends!"

His car, a shabby roadster, shuddered in the driveway.

"You're a fine looking thing to be parked here," he told it as he climbed in behind the wheel.

The library windows were rectangles of pale light set in the dark wall. Shadows wavered across them, figures of people moving about inside. David watched them, his arms folded across the wheel, the brim of his hat pulled far down over his stormy blue eyes. He pictured the room glimpsed for only a moment. Firelight shining on mahogany and brass. Soft rugs. Roses in crystal bowls. Family portraits. Dignity and traditions . . . She belonged in there with her tawny bright head, her slender young grace, the proud little tilt of her chin. And he could only watch from outside. A shabby small boy with his

nose pressed against a toy-shop window, longing for things he never might have . . .

Thought he had stopped wanting things . . . Did you ever? Was it possible to forge an armour proof against condescension, against cold unfriendly eyes. He had thought so. Since childhood he had fashioned his coat-of-mail, carefully link by link, only to find it a feeble defence when most he needed its protection. Words like slivers of ice . . . "Very kind of you" . . . And they had offered him money! Money for taking care of Elizabeth! As though he had been a servant. Keeping him in his place. The princess and the shepherd boy. "Snobs!" he muttered . . . "Hell!" and released the brakes with a sudden jerk.

The car lurched down the drive between a double line of snowy poplars, through the arched gateway, out into the road. David's anger cooled a little . . . Idiot! he told himself savagely. Expect them to fall on your neck? "So the Princess married the shepherd boy and they all lived happily ever after" . . . Bunk! Dreams are dreams and reality quite a different matter. Mustn't confuse them, Davie, me lad. But Elizabeth . . . He had worshipped her ever since he was twelve years old. He had built her a shrine in his heart, burned candles and all but said his prayers to her. All right. Keep her there . . . Dreams are dreams . . . "Thank you, David" . . . Her voice had trembled a little, her hand in his had been slender and soft and warm. No hint of condescension. Friendly. Her eyes had

hated them when they offered him money . . . "Come to see me, David. I'll be a prisoner now" . . . Right in front of them all. Bless her! Still being kind to a lonely forlorn little boy . . .

The car moved very slowly, its wheels following well-grooved ruts in the snow. David's hands turned the wheel unassisted by his mind. That was filled with memories . . . Elizabeth! He remembered the day he first had seen her sitting on the steps of Miss Phoebe's kitchen porch, a dainty little girl with tilted eyes and bright hair cut in a deep soft bang. He had been sitting on the roof of his own porch next door, lonely and miserable, trying not to mind because he wasn't invited to Jim Forrest's birthday party. She had climbed up the pumpkin vine to Miss Phoebe's porch and he had scrambled over through the pear tree branches . . .

"What's your name?"

"David . . . What's yours?"

"Elizabeth . . . Can you see things in the clouds?"

"Sometimes."

"I can. Castles and faces and giants."

"Look . . . Up there over the hill."

"It's like white of eggs. God must use a big egg beater. Don't you think so, David?"

"You bet you . . . And up there's an elephant."

"No, David. That's a ship with sails all puffed out in the wind" . . .

David, then, had never seen a real ship. Eliza-

beth had. She told him about a place named Mayport where she went every summer. There were rocks, she had said, and little pools between where starfish and periwinkles lived. You could catch them if you were careful. The ocean, David had learned, tasted salty when the spray dashed in your face and was full of waves that curled up on the beach and washed back again leaving scallops of foam like lace. Sometimes they brought things out of the sea; shells, driftwood, tiny crabs . . .

David had listened enchanted. He had forgotten to feel lonely and shy. What a pretty little girl, he had thought. Her hair was the color of apple jelly when you held it up to the light. Not yellow and not quite red. Sort of in between. Her cheeks were pinky tan. Like peaches. Only not any fuzz. There was sort of an "upness" about her face. Her mouth tilted up and her eyes and her nose. You wouldn't be surprised to see all of her fly up in the air with her scarlet tam o' shanter like a cardinal's crest. Her voice sounded like silver bells . . .

"My daddy's a soldier. He's going to France."

Oh, the wonder of a father who was going to France! The dreadful hurt of a father who was a thief!

"Is your daddy a soldier?"

"My father . . . died."

"That's too bad . . . Do you like picnics?"

"Sure."

"Let's have one . . . Up there on the hill."

"You and me?"

"Yes . . . Nobody else."

"Will they let you?"

"I could run away."

"All right . . . Let's" . . .

And then, David remembered, they had been interrupted. Eyes peered up at them, voices shocked and horrified had called from the yard below. Miss Phoebe, Grandmother Lloyd, Zeke in his silk hat and plum colored coat. David had scrambled into the pear branches. Elizabeth had descended the pumpkin vine . . .

"You mustn't talk to that boy!"

"Why not, Grandmother?"

"He's not a nice boy."

"I will. He is . . . He's my friend." . .

She had called him her friend! David saw again the shabby small boy cowering among the pear branches, his heart in the tips of his boots. Her friend! Hurt and unhappiness had melted away. Then and there he had set up a shrine in his heart, a shrine for Elizabeth, his friend . . .

The memories trailing through David's head were abruptly checked. The car had reached the crazy wall and the gap that led to the barn. A girl lounged against the wall rimmed in the disk of the headlights. Brassy gold hair beneath a blue hat. Full red lips in a round childish face. A plush coat with a white fur collar . . . Amy Phelps!

"Hello, Dave!"

"Hello, Amy." David slammed on the breaks.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

She walked over to the car, stood on the running board.

"Haven't seen you in a month of Sundays. Got a girl?"

"No . . . Just busy." Darn her! What did she want?

"Why don't you stop in the store sometime?"

"I don't use lip sticks." . . What was she doing out here alone?

"We sell razors, too. And soap and cough medicine."

"I haven't needed any this week." . . The perfume. Whew!

"Well, you might stop in anyway."

"All right . . . sometime." His impatient hand moved toward the brake.

"Let's go for a ride, Dave. There's a swell moon."

"Too much snow". . . Why did he dance with her the other night? Why did he go to that dance at all?

"We can walk."

"Can't Amy. I've something to do". . . Dreaming to do . . . Elizabeth!

"Don't you like me any more, Dave?" The red lips pouted.

"Of course. But I'm busy to-night."

"See if I care!" She stepped down off the running board.

"I'll drive you home, Amy" . . . Might as well be decent. Poor kid!

"No thanks." She tossed her head. "Had a date anyways. 'Bye Dave."

"Good-night, Amy."

She walked on down the street toward town, turned a corner and was instantly forgotten. Amy Phelps who worked in the drug store had no place in the thoughts that filled David's head. He drove into the barn and parked the car beside Jerry's junk wagon. "Lady" moved in her stall; whinnied for attention. He leaned across the low partition, idly stroked her nose. Through a high small window laced with cobwebs he caught the frosty twinkle of a star . . . "The wagon and the star" . . . Bunk! . . .

"Lady," he said. "Do you believe in Santa Claus and God and magic and fairies?"

She whinnied softly and nuzzled against his arm.

"Lucky girl," he said thoughtfully. "Wish *I* did."

❋ II ❋

Jerry sat beside the fire, dozing, wreathed in the smoke from his pipe. He glanced up as David entered the room.

"Get there all right?" he asked.

"Yes."

David dropped into a chair on the other side of the rough stone fireplace, stretched out his legs to the blaze. He did not feel like talking. The room was filled with memories of Elizabeth. There, drawn up close to the fire, was the sofa where she had lain, a graceful sofa unholstered in tattered brocade, one of Jerry's antiques. The pillow still cherished the hollow imprinted by her head. He saw it there, clipped and shining, tawny bright against the dull brocade. There was the cup she had used, set in its saucer on a table quaintly inlaid with mother of pearl. He fancied there remained in the air a breath of her delicate perfume. Arbutus, he thought, fresh as a spring morning. The room would never seem the same again. Elizabeth had been there.

A footstool stood beside the sofa. He had sat there after the ankle was bandaged. Jerry made coffee in the kitchen, clattering pans as he moved briskly about. They had been alone with the firelight and Jerry's antiques, a few lovely things discarded because they were shabby; fiddle-backed chairs, the rose-wood table, a melodeon with yellowed keys and branched gilt holders for candles; clocks, five of them, ticking and striking together. Gloom in the dusky corners; shadows against the ceiling. He had sat very close beside her. Talking was difficult. The lost years yawned between. They spoke of impersonal things . . .

"Like ghosts, aren't they, David? Think of the tales they could tell."

"Jerry hates to sell them. He sets an enormous price and grumbles when people will pay it."

"Nice old Jerry! . . . Is 'Lady' still alive?"

"Fat and lazy and pampered."

"And the blue wagon?"

"Shaky but serviceable."

"It doesn't seem ten years. Except when I look at you. You're grown up, David . . . So very big!"

"I'm no older, really. I was a solemn old man at ten."

She had noticed the letter on his sweater.

"College, David?"

"State — '26. Thanks to Jerry."

"Foot ball?"

"Three years."

"Then that accounts for your nose. I thought it looked different somehow."

She had stroked it with the tip of her finger. David felt again that fleeting, light caress . . . Elizabeth! . . .

"Wake up, son." Jerry's voice seemed to come from a long distance.

David roused with a start.

"I've asked you the same question three times." Jerry's eyes twinkled beneath the crochety brows.

"Sorry . . . What was it?"

"How did they treat you out there?" He jerked his pipe in the direction of "The Poplars."

"Well, they didn't fall on my neck." Again David's lips twisted into a grim smile.

"Reckon likely," Jerry chuckled. "The old lady would make a king wonder if his crown was set on straight. Airs!"

"They offered me money."

"They would!" Jerry's eyes snapped. "Think they can buy the earth and a ticket to Heaven." He puffed out a cloud of smoke. "And the girl?"

"She hated them for it, I think."

"I wouldn't wonder. She's spunky. Always was. Remember that time she fell off the barn roof? Never whimpered though she must a seen a million stars."

"I remember."

"Different from the rest of 'em," mused Jerry. "Friendly. Used to bring me flowers. Nice little thing. Her father was like that, I've heard. Had a fuss with the old lady, married the girl he wanted and hoed his own row. Leastwise till he came back from the war . . . Pretty, ain't she?"

"She's beautiful," David said.

Jerry darted a quick glance at him from under his bristling brows.

"You'd not forgotten her, son?"

"Forgotten her?" David smiled. "You don't forget a miracle."

"A miracle, Davie?"

"She called me her friend when I was a kid. That was a miracle. I'd never had a friend before, except you and my mother. I think I have worshipped her ever since."

"Hmm —" said Jerry and smoked for a moment in silence. Then, "You don't mean seriously, son?"

"Not that way, I guess," David answered slowly, his blue eyes dreaming into the fire. "But just to be her . . . friend."

Jerry seemed relieved.

"Better not get notions, son. You're as fine as they come but junk don't mix with diamond ear drops, not even if you call it antiques, and a wagon ain't a carriage."

"I know that." David's voice was grave. "I stopped believing in fairy tales when I was six. At ten I was a solemn old man."

"Yes," Jerry agreed. "You was a queer little shaver. Seemed as though you thought about things. I could fairly see them turnin' over in your mind. 'Twarn't right nor natural. Children ought to be like puppies, not worried about anything but food. You wasn't that way, Davie."

"You see, Jerry, someone in the family had to be grown up and Mother was always a child. She played games about everything — even my father."

"Games, Davie?"

"She pretended he was a wonderful sort of per-

son. I didn't remember him. It — It happened, you know, before I was two. But I knew that was only a game. My father was a thief and he had deserted us so they couldn't put him in jail. Lord, I heard the story often enough. But I played Mother's game. I never could bear it to see her cry. She was such a child! I understood. Kids do, more than you'd think. I hated my father so that it was like a pain inside. And that," he finished, "is why I was a solemn old man at ten."

"Yes, son," said Jerry gently. "I know it wasn't a bed of roses. I never could figure out why folks seem bound to blame a child for somethin' his father did. Just human nature, I reckon."

"It spoiled everything that was pleasant and friendly and fun. Only Elizabeth . . . She liked me in spite of it. No wonder I loved her and always shall. But I don't believe in fairy tales. That's the bunk . . . Only . . ." he paused suddenly, his eyes intent on the fire.

"What, son?"

"Only I can't help it. It's part of me. A sort of religion, I guess."

The hopeless tone in his voice, the droop of his shoulders, the lean squared line of his jaw touched Jerry's heart. He coughed and blew his nose. Any display of emotion embarrassed him woefully.

"Stop moonin'," he said sharply. "And fetch in some wood for the fire. Lazy young rascal! You want I should freeze to death?"

But when David had left the room he coughed very loudly and blew his nose again.

✲ III ✲

The lamp on David's table burned far into the night. Long after Jerry had gone to bed he sat in his study chair gazing at the coals in the round iron stove. "Rags," worn out with the day's adventures slept at his feet. The house was still. Occasionally a window rattled or a coal dropped with a soft thud into the ashes below the grate. These sounds did not disturb David. Lost to time and surroundings he sat in the yellow circle of lamplight while fancies, vague and formless, trailed endlessly through his head.

One hand held a book, a slim water stained copy of "The Idylls of the King." David was not concerned, however, with the feats of Arthur's valiant knights. The book lay open at the fly leaf. On it was written in looped and shaded letters:

"To Ronald
With love from Aunt Lucy.
Hitch your wagon to a star
Keep your seat and there you are."

Neither "Ronald" nor "Aunt Lucy" was an acquaintance of David's. He had found the book in one of Jerry's junk piles and kept it because of

the quotation. At intervals his eyes strayed to the looped and shaded letters, blurred now and faded by time. Words that Jerry had spoken a long time ago recurred to him . . . "Find your star, Davie me lad, and stick tight to the wagon seat" . . . As the words drifted through his mind the grim smile twisted his lips and his eyes strayed back to the glowing coals . . . Faith of his childhood . . . "The wagon and the star" . . .

At last the wick in the lamp spluttered a warning. Downstairs the assorted clocks struck two. David heard the faint chiming notes muffled by walls and shadows. He rose from the chair, crossed to the window and parted the drawn curtains. Above the oak tree on Laurel Hill twinkled a star, very bright and very far away. He watched it thoughtfully for a moment. Then he flung the book into the corner.

"Bunk!" he muttered and drew the curtains across the pane.

Chapter Four

❋ I ❋

BUT Mother, why not? Why shouldn't David have been invited?" Elizabeth asked for perhaps the twentieth time.

"Now dear, Grandmother knows best," soothed Mother brushing Elizabeth's hair with gentle lingering strokes.

"Why does she?" asked the clear young voice.

"Well, because she is Grandmother," said Mother not very convincingly.

"Apple sauce!" Elizabeth snapped. "Grandmother is rather a disgusting sort of snob!"

"Darling!" There was shocked reproof in Mother's voice.

"You know she is but you won't admit it. You're so everlastingly meek."

"Don't talk that way, dear," Mother coaxed. "Grandmother has been kind."

"Why shouldn't she be kind? Why shouldn't she take care of us?"

"She has — beautifully." Mother was close to tears.

"But that doesn't give her the right to own me body and soul," raged Elizabeth. "It makes me furious! I could bite and throw things!"

"Please don't, dear" Mother's voice trembled. Glancing into the mirror Elizabeth saw that she was crying. Her anger cooled a little.

"You're an angel," she said, holding Mother's thin hand against her cheek. "And I'm an ungrateful wretch. But it makes me furious just the same. David is my friend. It would have been only decent to ask him."

"Well, you know how particular Grandmother is."

"Know! Of course, I know!" The words fanned her smouldering resentment into a blaze. "I had that pounded into my head ten years ago."

"And," Mother continued anxiously, "there's that story about his father—"

"It wasn't his fault," stormed Elizabeth. "Whatever his father did, it wasn't David's fault. Why, for heaven's sake, should they blame it on him?"

"Well, dear," Mother groped for soothing words. "You know how people are."

"People are stupid and cruel!" Elizabeth's eyes were dark with wrath. "It might happen to anybody. It might have happened to me. Oh, I'd just like to stay right here and not go downstairs at all!"

Mother was alarmed. She remembered a former occasion when Elizabeth had refused to attend her own party because this Warren boy wasn't invited. Her flashing eyes, the stubborn line of her

mouth indicated very plainly that somewhere inside the lovely grown up Elizabeth that wilful child still lived. Mother gave a gasp of dismay.

"Darling! You couldn't do that? What would people say? Roger is here — and Hope. Why, Elizabeth!"

"Yes, I know. Of course, I can't. But I'd like to just the same. Snobs! I was ashamed of Uncle Randolph when he offered David money for bringing me home. Simply ashamed!"

"But why make an issue of it?" Mother asked patiently. "Uncle Randolph meant only to be kind."

"Kind!" Another outburst threatened. Mother held her breath. But Elizabeth's rage was exhausted. "Oh well, what's the use?" she said in a listless voice. "It's like knocking your head against a wall. Makes you see stars and does nobody any good." She smiled up at Mother and repeated a childish formula familiar to them both. "Don't cry, Mummy. I'll be a good girl now."

Immensely relieved, Mother bustled about the room intent upon the adornment of her beautiful stubborn child . . . Like her father, she thought. Philip hated injustice. He always said they were snobs. "Don't let them spoil Elizabeth." But what can I do? . . . Mother sighed inwardly at the hopelessness of it all. Aloud she chattered of diverting trifles.

"They're beginning to come. There's a car in

the drive. Everything is lovely, dear." She drew a filmy stocking over Elizabeth's bandaged ankle. "Don't try to stand on it, please. "I'm sorry you can't dance but accidents will happen. Thank fortune it was no worse. Lina has made rolled sandwiches tied with ribbon. They look like baby diplomas. And Zeke is wearing his store teeth. The crystal chandelier is lighted for the first time since Lucile's wedding. Stand up just a minute. I'll slip this over your head."

Elizabeth disappeared for a moment in folds of creamy taffeta. Then her head emerged, ruffled a little and needing the brush again. Mother fastened the tight bodice, smoothed the full gathered skirt. The dark rim of the mirror framed an enchanting picture. Elizabeth did not see it. Resentment, a furious sort of rage burned in her heart. They should have invited David. She scowled at the girl in the mirror and almost hated the taffeta frock, cunningly fluted and stitched in gold, because Grandmother had given it to her . . . David! She hoped he would not be dreadfully hurt. Dear of him to send the roses, unnoticed among the profusion of Christmas flowers, preserved until the last yellow bud had drooped. She was glad she had written him a note; two notes dispatched by Rinthy. Hateful to sneak about it as though her friendship for David was a disgusting sort of intrigue . . . David! The smell of the sheepskin collar, smoke and snow and clean fresh air . . . He was like that

somehow . . . Real . . . And life had not been easy for him. Why shouldn't he have been invited? Thoughts circling through her mind, over and over, the same furious round.

Mother's voice interrupted.

"These really are lovely, dear," she said.

She was fastening about Elizabeth's throat Roger's Christmas gift, a necklace of filagreed gold set with amethysts. There were bracelets to match, Embree heirlooms, priceless and heavy and dull. Elizabeth would have preferred something gay and sparkling. But Roger doted on heirlooms. Symbols of aristocracy. Apple sauce! For a moment she resented the touch of the necklace against her throat. The gods of Salem! She was a little weary of them. What in the world had happened to her? She had never felt like that before. Mad clear through. Heavens, what a temper!

A knock at the door; a laughing voice.

"Please, may I come in?"

Without waiting for permission Hope danced into the room. She was tiny and dark and vivacious with short tumbling curls and eyes like purple black pansies flecked with glints of gold. Peaked brows and a pointed chin, lips that smiled with a gamin grin. Shades of the Salem gods! How could you account for Hope! Gay and droll and amusing, an elf in scarlet chiffon.

She paused in the doorway, smiled at Elizabeth over the box that she held in her arms.

"You're gorgeous, Beth!"

"Thank you . . . What's that?"

"Posies. They just came. Roger has been fuming for hours. He's wilted two collars and wrecked his tie."

Hope set the box on the bed, lifted from it an old fashioned boquet with trailing ribbons and a lace paper frill.

"Lovely!" Mother exclaimed. "So quaint!"

"Just like Roger," said Hope with a smile and a shrug. "Beth darling, couldn't you possibly wear mitts?"

"They're sweet," Elizabeth said and wondered if she was expected to carry it all evening. What a girl! she accused herself. Blaming Roger because Grandmother was a disgusting sort of snob. She buried her face in the flowers and humbly begged their pardon.

Hope inspected Elizabeth with a sidewise tilt of her head.

"The Embree heirlooms! Poor Beth! You'll drop from utter exhaustion. But you might as well get used to them. The emeralds are to follow."

"Silly!" Elizabeth smiled. Hope had no reverence for the gods of Salem. She was seldom serious about anything, least of all about Roger.

"People are here," Hope continued flitting about the room. "It looks like fairyland and the punch is great. Roger and Lloyd are waiting to take you downstairs."

They made a chair of their crossed hands; Roger tall and well groomed displaying no traces of his recent fuming, Roger with his lean, interesting face, his studious eyes, his quaintly formal manner and Lloyd, Elizabeth's favorite cousin, tall and blonde, — Lloyd who used to be a shining young god, Lloyd who had somehow lost his wings.

"You are beautiful," Roger said as they neared the stair landing. "Queen Elizabeth."

"Queen!" she said sharply. "Nonsense!"

Roger's eyes, gray eyes behind shell rimmed glasses, looked vaguely hurt. Elizabeth was contrite, ashamed of her temper, ashamed of being upset. Roger was here! She brushed her cheek against his hair.

"Sorry," she whispered. "But Queen Bess had warts and a temper. I'd rather be . . . just your Beth."

❋ II ❋

The party was over. Long ago the whistles and tiny toy trumpets had clattered in the New Year. The spruce tree in the drawing room had been stripped of its favors. The crystal chandelier sent glints of light across the bare polished floor, strewn here and there with drifts of confetti, forgotten favors, spangles, wisps of tulle. Wash and Rinthy moved languidly about, arranging furniture, setting things to rights. Grandmother twinkling with jewels and satisfaction trailed upstairs. Aunt

Dolly followed, limping a little because her slippers pinched. Uncle Randolph was driving the Trueworthy's home and Mother in the kitchen was helping Lina to blanket the Randolph spoons. The candles burned low; the roses drooped; the clock on the landing struck two.

"Tired Beth?" Roger stood beside Elizabeth's chair in the hall.

"A little," she answered wearily. "Tired of smiling and being polite."

"It wasn't much fun for you."

"I loved it," she fibbed loyally. "Grandmother always puts on a good show."

"She's a real aristocrat," Roger said in tones of deep admiration.

"Yes, isn't she?" said Elizabeth and winced . . . Grandmother condescending to David. Offering him money. Aristocrat! Apple sauce! You know how to keep a grudge, my dear, she said to herself with a shrug.

Hope turned from waving to Lloyd and Zeke closed the carved hall door.

"Well, that's the last of them," said Hope and yawned luxuriously.

"Not quite," called a voice from the landing.

They glanced up. Sally Sherman, bundled in fur and brocade, tripped down the steps with Ned Cannon, her surly fiance, in tow.

"We don't expect to stay all night," chirped Sally. "But I couldn't find my bag. We looked

everywhere. And Ned, the big stupid, had it in his pocket all the time."

Elizabeth smiled. Sally, she knew, expected you to enjoy the abuses she heaped on poor Ned. And another smile might be managed. Heavens, her face fairly ached!

"It was marvelous," Sally cooed, tilting on silver heels. "We've had a beautiful time. And I'm sorry about your ankle." Sally's green eyes narrowed. Her thin scarlet lips mysteriously smiled. "But it was romantic, now wasn't it, Betty, dear?"

"What?" Elizabeth asked. Sally, she remembered, had been, at twelve, a gossipy meddlesome sneak.

"To be rescued by your old sweetheart. Ned and I were quite touched, weren't we, big stupid?"

Sally's voice was honey-sweet but malice gleamed from her narrowed eyes. Ned looked uncomfortable. And Elizabeth, quite without reason, flushed.

"Like a fairy tale," cooed the honey-sweet voice. "The princess and the junk man's boy! . . . Well, good-night everybody. 'Bye Betty dear. Come along, big stupid, I'm simply dead on my feet."

Sally, like a fantastic bird with her long silver legs, her brilliant wrap, her clipped shaggy head, passed through the door which Zeke ceremoniously opened. As it closed behind her she clutched Ned's arm.

"Did you see her blush, Ned? My dear, wasn't it precious!"

"You ought to be slapped," muttered Ned. "Cat!"

"I'd like to see you try it!" Her voice no longer was sweet. "Serves her right for her airs. I never could stand Betty Lloyd." She descended the steps, pleased with herself and her rudeness and with the discord she hoped she had left behind.

There was no apparent discord. Zeke latched the door. "Good-night, Miss 'Lisbeth. 'Evenin' Mistah Roger. Ah wish you sweet dreams, Miss Hope." He shuffled off down the hall, his gallant old shoulders wearily drooped.

"Guess I'll go to bed." Hope moved toward the stairs. "In the words of the dear departed, I'm simply dead on my feet." She mounted the steps and vanished in a flutter of scarlet chiffon.

"Too sleepy to talk, Beth?" Roger asked.

"Not sleepy at all. Just tired of being polite." He lifted her from the carved oak chair.

"I'm getting accustomed to arms," she said thoughtlessly and was sorry a moment later for Roger said in a stiff cool voice, "Mine and the junk boy's, huh?"

"Silly!" she said. She nestled against his shoulder and silently condemned Sally Sherman to perdition.

They sat on the library davenport which had been drawn close to the fire. A few charred logs smouldered on the andirons above the bright em-

bers below. The jets of flame on the low burned candles fluttered like yellow moths. Elizabeth watched them idly, her head drooping like a weary flower toward Roger's shoulder. She talked drowsily about a number of things; the party, the music, Uncle Randolph waltzing with the Trueworthys turn and turn about. Nothing appeared to interest Roger. He was silent, grim and remote.

"You aren't listening to me," she said plaintively. "Your mind is back home in your study with the gods of Salem."

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Sleepy?"

"Not at all."

"Lina's fruit cake too heavy?"

"It was delicious."

Roger sulking! Roger who said quarreling was common! She glanced up at him from under the shadowy fans of her lashes. His mouth was set in a thin firm line. He scowled at the fire. Elizabeth had never seen him like that before. It frightened her a little.

"You aren't bothering about what Sally Sherman said?"

No answer from Roger.

"She must have seen us the night I twisted my ankle. And she loves a sensation. Little cat! She peeped through key holes when she was twelve."

Roger obviously was not interested in Sally's

youthful pleasures. He maintained his grimness, scowling on into the fire.

"Roger, don't be silly!" She smiled up at him, cuddled against an unresponsive shoulder.

A long interval of silence. And then, "Beth, who is this junk boy?" Roger asked.

"A friend of mine."

"An old sweetheart?"

"Hardly. I hadn't seen him for ten years or thought of him for eight." Roger sulking was ridiculous. It pleased her to tease him a little. "But he sent me a valentine when I was eleven years old."

"I can't commend your taste," said Roger stiffly. "Junk!"

Elizabeth's head jerked up from his shoulder; her chin lifted proudly.

"He is my friend," she said in tones as cool as his own.

"So I heard. A number of times. He rescued you." Roger's voice was edged with sarcasm. "Very romantic!"

"Fortunate, at any rate. I might have frozen."

"You let him carry you, Beth?"

"I haven't wings."

"I hate it, Beth. Why will you do things like that?"

"Twist my ankle," she struggled against a flash of anger. "Do you think I did it on purpose?"

"Of course not," he said impatiently. "You

know what I mean. Why will you encourage all sorts of people?"

"They are my friends," she said and her eyes blazed dangerously.

"This junk man?"

"He's a darling. And he isn't a junk man now. He sells antiques and wears trousers that match his coat. Nice old Jerry!"

"And the boy?"

"David is . . ." she searched for the appropriate word. What was David? Sturdy — decent — fine — None of the adjectives would do. "David," she continued, "is my friend."

"Very well." There was a barely perceptible catch in Roger's voice. Elizabeth repented. She thought of Roger being kind to her when Father died, sailing with Roger at Marblehead, walking through the Boston common, amused at the swan boats, liking the same sort of things . . .

"We're quarreling," she said gently. "On New Year's. Roger!"

"I'm sorry, Beth. It's just . . . Oh well, I'm jealous, I guess. And it seemed so undignified."

She was in his arms, sobbing a little, resting her cheek against his.

"Bad luck to quarrel on New Year's day. Let's not, Roger . . . Please!"

"It's just because I love you." His arms tightened around her. "You're sacred to me, Beth. Too exquisite to be touched by common hands."

A rebellious thought slipped into her mind,

threatened the moment of tenderness . . . David isn't common. David is fine. But what's the use. I could never make Roger understand . . . She sighed softly, brushed her lashes against his cheek.

Roger talked easily enough now that the barrier was down. He told her she was the sort of woman he had dreamed should be his wife, gracious and beautiful, but queenly and remote. A woman to whom dignity was the chief of virtues, not a giddy gadfly like Hope. A woman who would respect his work and grace his fireside. It sounded like an old fashioned proposal. The phrases, the sentiment would have been the same had he worn a stock and she a crinoline. The fancy amused her. She smiled and was instantly sorry. Roger was sincere. And she liked his courtly manner. Did she? . . . Of course . . . She sternly dismissed the first small ghost of a doubt.

"You should live in a crystal palace," Roger finished his tribute. "Lovely Queen Elizabeth."

"But I'm not like that, Roger. Don't you know? I should hate a crystal palace."

"You are to me," he protested still faithful to his dream.

"I'm not," she said slowly. "Not a bit like that. Don't try to make me over. Please love me just as I am."

"I do," said Roger tenderly.

"Temper?" she smiled, "and tantrums and bandage and all?"

"Of course."

"Honest and true?"

"Cross my heart." He performed the childish rite to her entire satisfaction.

"Well," she drew a long sigh. "That makes me feel better. Now carry me upstairs, please. Emotions are exhausting. I feel like a gingham doll."

"I'm sorry," he lifted her from the davenport. "Forgive me, Beth." His voice was gentle; his gray eyes no longer scowled.

"It was my fault, too." Elizabeth was sweetly submissive in the calm that followed a storm. "I've been cross all day. But Roger . . ."

"Yes, dear?"

"I hate pedestals. And a crystal palace would be a lonesome place to live."

"Funny!"

Roger's eyes in the dim light of the hall were very tender. Dear Roger! Able to give her the things that she wanted from life. Elizabeth felt safe and warm and protected. Let the story book girls have their raptures. She didn't miss them. Did she? . . . Of course not . . . The second small ghost of a doubt was sternly banished.

❋ III ❋

"Beth . . ."

"Yes, Hope."

"Haven't you been asleep?"

"No . . ."

"Crying?"

"Of course not."

"Did Roger quarrel with you."

"I did most of it. I have a temper. Guess you know."

"And Roger's so stuffy and proud. You won't be a person, Beth. Just Roger's wife, a halo around his head."

"That's enough."

"Rats! You think so now. But wait till your wings are clipped."

"They won't be. Nobody could do that."

"He'll try . . . if you spread them at all. Oh, Roger's a dear about lots of things but he will keep his ladies on a pedestal. And nobody on earth could stay there. I toppled off long ago."

"We smashed the pedestal to-night."

"Yes? Well, Roger will build another. Building pedestals is his favorite occupation, and being hurt when they crash. Dad is like that and Mother enjoys a lofty perch. But me — Well, my great grandfather married a Spanish dancing girl and I seem to be the unfortunate result. That's why I can't worship the gods of Salem. They killed the little dancer."

"Oh well —"

"Don't let Roger change you to fit his pedestal. He'll try. I know he will."

"But he won't succeed. He likes me just as I am."

"Sweet innocence! He doesn't know you at all . . . There, sleep that off . . . 'Night, Beautiful."

"Good night, Hope . . . Happy dreams."

Hope's curly head burrowed into the pillow and presently she was fast asleep. Elizabeth watched the moonlight washing in silver ripples across the wall. She thought of Roger and the scene in the library. He had seemed like a stranger. Was he? After all she knew him so little; a few week ends, a short vacation in Marblehead, brief visits to Salem . . . And Hope, perhaps, was right. He knew even less about her . . . Pedestals and palaces! . . . Did you ever know people really? They changed so with circumstances. In his own setting Roger was perfect . . . Here — Well, no use to fret. Everybody wondered about the same sort of things. And no one ever knew . . .

Dark lashes fluttered against her cheeks. She slipped over the border land into sleep, dreamed that Roger was trying to clip her wings with an enormous pair of shears. He did not succeed. Up, high up, she rose to the top of a distant hill. A figure waited for her there beneath the copper-green foliage of a giant oak tree. From a distance it looked strange and beautiful. But when she reached the top of the hill she found that it was only little Davie Warren with a wooden sword and freckles across his nose!

Chapter Five

❋ I ❋

ELIZABETH sat curled up in a chair beside the library fire. A book lay open upon her lap but her eyes strayed from the printed words to dream into the flames. Outside there was a snow and sunlight, a sharp exhilarating wind. She would have liked to tramp along the river road and climb to the top of the hill. But the twisted ankle still held her a prisoner. She was restless and more than a little bored.

Roger had returned to Cambridge. Hope stayed on for a visit but Elizabeth had not been permitted to enjoy her company exclusively. Lloyd was always there. Hope teased him, snubbed him, captivated him entirely. That, Elizabeth thought, was good for Lloyd. He had, apparently, no definite ambitions. It seemed probable that he would develop into a perennial beau, dancing with each succeeding generation of Winchester buds, growing stout and fussy about his meals, idly drifting into aimless middle age. And that was a shame. Lloyd had been splendid once, before he had lost his wings. She was glad that Hope was waking him up.

They were in the music room. Hope was singing. Her family believed she had a Voice, and

Hope encouraged the delusion because it permitted her to live in the Boston apartment which she flippantly called her "Studio." The voice, in spite of conservatory training, was not remarkable. But it was charming, a warm husky contralto that pulled at your heart strings, — created for blues and not for arias, — as inconsistent with the Embree traditions as was Hope herself. A legacy from the dancing girl, perhaps.

"Fish gotta swim and birds gotta fly
I gotta love one man 'til I die."

sang Hope. The minor chords, the crooning voice were vaguely disturbing. Elizabeth frowned into the fire. The song, she thought, made you feel that love was the most important thing in the world, more important than ease and gracious surroundings, more to be desired than peace and heirlooms and traditions. Nonsense! She shrugged her shoulders. That was the magic of Hope's voice. She could sing "A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" in a fashion to make you weep.

"Tell me he's lazy, tell me he's slow
Tell me I'm crazy, maybe I know.
Can't help lovin' that man of mine"

crooned the voice in the music room. Softly, plaintively, it rose and fell above the light accompaniment. Elizabeth stirred restlessly in the deep leather chair. Sentimental! she accused herself. Love

wasn't a throbbing heartache like that. It was ease and friendship, liking the same sort of things . . . Roger . . . Would she have cared for him without his setting? Foolish! How could you tell? What on earth was the matter with her? She had never felt like that before, restless, wanting something . . .

There were, she decided, two Elizabeths; the charming hostess who would grace Roger's fireside and the gypsy Elizabeth who loved adventuring, more than ease. Entirely the fault of that tilt at the end of her nose. Better to banish the gypsy, disturbing jade that she was. The wilful, tawny-haired small Elizabeth had been like that. For years she had drowsed beneath the lovely grown-up shell until forgotten and unconsidered Memories and old associations had roused her. The tawny small ghost had grown into the gypsy Elizabeth, a creature to be banished. Roger did not know the gypsy and would have disliked her if he did. Better to do away with her at once, bury her under the embers. Could she? It seemed an impossible task. Elizabeth sighed.

"Am I useless, Beth?" Lloyd's voice, slightly aggrieved, interrupted the obsequies of the gypsy Elizabeth. He came into the room, tall and blonde and nice looking in spite of the fretful lines around his mouth, the discontented expression that shadowed his bright blue eyes.

"Who says you are," Elizabeth asked.

"I do," Hope danced through the doorway. "It's Thursday and half past two. You ought to be at work, young man." She perched on the arm of Elizabeth's chair. Lloyd leaned languidly against the mantel. "I've been amusing you," he smiled down at tiny scolding Hope.

"Liar!" she flashed back. "I've done the amusing. Why aren't you at work?"

"Couldn't keep away," he teased. "The magnet and the needle."

"A rusty needle!" Hope scoffed. "And no point to you, so far as I can see."

Lloyd dropped his bantering tone.

"I hate the mill!" he said irritably. "Machines and lace for window curtains. Lord what a life!"

"Window curtains are useful," said Hope severely.

"But not exciting." Lloyd's eyes were sulky.

"What do you prefer, lily of the field?"

"I'd like to fly again." His voice was hushed and reverent. Lloyd was talking about his gods.

"Well, why don't you?" Hope inquired.

"It's been a long time. I've . . . forgotten."

"Rats!" Hope tossed her tumbling curls. "You could learn again."

"Did you care about it so much, Lloyd?" Elizabeth asked gently.

"It was great! From wings to lace curtains . . . Hell!"

"There are ladies present," Hope reproved with her gamin grin.

"One lady," Lloyd answered. "And a witch left over from Salem."

"Thanks," said Hope. And then in a milder tone. "Why didn't you keep your wings, Lloyd?"

"Family dictates. The lace mill or the gate. And," his jauntiness ebbed away. "I hadn't much backbone, I guess."

Grandmother, Elizabeth thought. Regal little tyrant, an accomplished clipper of wings. Poor Lloyd. He had been managed all his life.

"Maybe he's lazy," sang Hope, "Maybe he's slow. Maybe he's spineless, how do I know?"

"Hush!" said Elizabeth sharply. "That song gives me the weary blues. If you're not useless, Lloyd, prove it at once."

"How?"

"Think of something to do. I'm bored and craving sunshine."

"I'll take you out in the car," he offered.

"The car is too stuffy," Elizabeth objected. "I'd like a sleigh with bells and a prancing horse. Too bad 'Prince' and 'Duke' aren't here and the cutter Uncle Randolph used to drive."

Lloyd considered for a moment.

"Remember the swan sleigh, Beth?" he asked with a smile.

Elizabeth remembered the graceful little sleigh,

old fashioned ten years ago, a relic of Aunt Dolly's glamorous youth.

"Of course." Her eyes sparkled with anticipation. "Where is it, Lloyd?"

"Used to be in the school house. I'll get the key from Zeke. And you, young lady," he turned to Hope. "Go get your bonnet and shawl. Am I useless? Answer me that."

"You show signs of improvement," smiled Hope. "Faint," from the doorway she tossed him her gamin grin, "but encouraging."

Elizabeth in the middle, supported by an arm on either side, they walked under the arbor and down the path to the school house. The lock was rusty. Evidently it was little used. Lloyd conquered it finally. He opened the weather-worn door into a small square room with blackboards between the windows and an open stove at one end. Miss Phoebe's table, covered with dull green felt, and the four battered desks were inches deep with dust. Rusty tools filled the corners, flower pots, a grindstone wreathed with coils of garden hose. Cobwebs draped the windows, hung from the low dim ceiling. The air had a closed up musty smell suggestive of dust and mice.

"Here it is." Lloyd tossed aside layers of burlap, dragged from a cluttered corner the sleigh that was shaped like a swan. "Lucky it was covered," he said after a brief inspection. "The runners aren't too rusty."

The swan's plumage no longer was snowy white. The gilt paint had tarnished. Mice and moth had chewed the blue upholstery into tatters. But there it was, a sleigh for Elizabeth with jingling bells and a handle to push it along.

Hope was delighted. "The cunning thing!" she exclaimed. "It must be a hundred years old."

"Not that ancient. Aunt Dolly used to ride in it," Elizabeth said. "She wore a blue bonnet, I'm sure, with feathers that fluttered and trailed."

"And an ermine muff," added Hope. "And people said, 'These giddy young things! What *will* become of the world?'"

"Don't ape your elders. It's impertinent," Lloyd said. "Be useful, young lady. Practise what you preach. Ask Lina for a brush and a dust cloth. This relic of somebody's youth needs a cleaning."

Hope departed on her errand and Lloyd dragged the sleigh outside. Elizabeth lingered in the school house. Strange, she mused, to think that Uncle Randolph had once been a small boy, that Aunt Julia and Aunt Dolly had swung their striped stockinged legs from those tiny seats. And there was Father's desk with "Phillip" cut in the top. She flicked off the dust with her handkerchief, traced with a caressing finger the tipsy childish letters. Father had been a rebel, too, naughtier than the others, dreamy, hating injustice. Elizabeth was like him. They often told her so. Dear Father!

She thought she would like to have that battered desk with "Phillip" cut in the top. For her own children, perhaps . . .

Her eyes strayed about the room, paused at the open stove. A small heap of ashes lay on the grate, fragments of paper not entirely destroyed. She glanced at them idly and then with greater interest. A piece of an envelope bearing a foreign stamp attracted her attention. She picked it up, brushed off the film of ash dust. Half of the envelope had been burned away. On the half which had survived the latter part of Uncle Randolph's name was written in faded ink. The letters were large and distinctive, obviously written by a man with swoops and flourishes and curly tails to the "y"s.

Wondering a little, she poked about among the ashes, collected a handful of scattered fragments. Here and there she was able to distinguish a word written with the same swoops and flourishes, the same curly tails to the "ys." On one charred fragment she found a date — 1905. Queer, she thought. That was over twenty years ago. Old letters discarded at housecleaning time, perhaps. Smiling at her curiosity, she dropped the fragments into the grate. A last one clung to her fingers. She looked at it before she sent it fluttering down to join the others, saw, charred and blurred but faintly legible the name — "David."

Elizabeth was conscious of a little thrill of

excitement. She laughed it away. There were thousands of Davids in the world. Why shouldn't one of them have written to Uncle Randolph? 1905 — Her David, she smiled at the possessive adjective, could not have been more than two years old then. Strange that she should instantly have thought of him. No, not strange either. She thought about him a great deal. But there were other Davids. She dropped the last scrap of paper into the grate but kept the piece of envelope meaning to ask Uncle Randolph about the stamp. Then, in answer to a lusty summons from Lloyd, she left the school house and closed the door behind her.

❋ II ❋

Lloyd pushed the sleigh down the drive between the double line of snowy poplars.

"Which way?" he asked halting the procession at the gate.

"Into town," Hope directed. "Let's give them a treat."

"All right, Beth?"

"I don't care," Elizabeth answered, her eyes sparkling beneath a beaver cap. "Just so we move. It's great to be out again. I feel like a prisoner set free."

"You look especially gorgeous," Hope said admiringly. "Like a princess out of a fairy tale."

"Too bad Roger can't see her," teased Lloyd.

"It's a good thing," Hope said wisely. "Roger would say 'Get back on your throne, Miss Princess, and set your crown on straight.'"

Elizabeth smiled . . . But after all, Roger is like that, the gypsy Elizabeth reminded her . . . A little of the brightness faded out of the day . . . Of course he is. That's why I like him, the grown up Elizabeth reproved her gypsy self. A very disturbing young minx. She needed so often to be snubbed . . .

The procession moved toward town, bells jingling, the sleigh runners creaking across the snow.

"Think it will hold together?" Lloyd eyed the equipage doubtfully.

"It may fall entirely to pieces," Elizabeth laughed. "Like the wonderful one horse shay."

"Who cares?" said Hope. "It's not very far to the ground."

The sun shone brightly, the sky was very blue. Hope and Lloyd talked a great deal of nonsense. Elizabeth, snug and warm beneath a soft robe, enjoyed the sun, the wind and the happy nonsense. Lovely day . . . Nice people, Lloyd and Hope . . . It was pleasant to be alive. They passed Jerry's house, turned into Willow and around a corner into Chestnut street. People along the way smiled at the merry procession. Royalty might ride in a wheelbarrow. Royalty could do no wrong.

"Let's go down to the drug store," Lloyd suggested. The restless expression had vanished from

his eyes. He had forgotten the lace mill. Lloyd was having a very nice time.

They parked the sleigh in front of the drug store and went inside. Strains of music, a babble of voices greeted them. The drug store was a gathering place for the high school crowd. There were stalls with high-backed seats and a cleared space for dancing. A Victrola played in the corner and someone had brought a banjo. It was gay and friendly and amusing. Lloyd found a vacant stall and settled his ladies.

"Who's that?" Hope asked suddenly.

"Where? Oh, that's Dave Warren," Lloyd answered casually. "How about sandwiches, Beth?"

Elizabeth, just then, had no interest in sandwiches. There, indeed, was David, leaning against the perfume counter, talking to a girl with brassy gold hair and pouting red lips. He turned as she watched him, saw her, left the counter abruptly.

"Who *is* he?" Hope asked again watching David stride toward them across the dancing space.

"The bone of contention," Elizabeth said. "That, my dear, is the junk man's boy."

"Looks more like Sir Galahad," whispered Hope. "I think I will break a leg."

"If there is any rescuing to be done—" threatened Lloyd. And then pleasantly enough, "Greetings, Dave. How does it feel to be a hero?"

Elizabeth drew a sigh of relief. Lloyd evi-

dently did not share the family prejudice against David. She presented him to Hope and was pleased with the obvious admiration in Hope's pansy-dark eyes. They talked together for a few minutes, easily, naturally, with no disturbing constraint. And that was pleasant, too. No need to be ashamed of David, Elizabeth thought. His manner was charming. Hope liked him and Lloyd was friendly. Dear David! He was nice people too.

Presently Lloyd pulled Hope to her feet. "Come on, nuisance, let's step." They danced away leaving David and Elizabeth alone.

"Sit down and keep me company," she invited.

"Thank you." His blue eyes smiled at her across the narrow table. The tie knotted under his flannel collar was the same deep blue. Entirely by accident, Elizabeth thought. David, she was sure, gave little thought to effects. It was, however, a becoming accident. Elizabeth approved.

"How's the ankle?" David asked.

"Better . . . I've never thanked you properly."

"Don't bother. It was a pleasure. For me, at least," He smiled his slow grave smile.

"I didn't mind it as much as you might have supposed," Elizabeth said demurely. "There were compensations."

"Such as?" he challenged.

"Jerry's coffee and the ride back home."

They smiled at each other and the smile was a bridge across the years.

"I liked the roses," Elizabeth said after an interval of silence.

"And I liked the notes."

"Rinthy must be part French," Elizabeth said lightly. "She dotes on intrigue. And the price I must pay! She will probably blackmail me all the rest of my life."

"We'll do away with her," David promised.

"I hate sneaking. But Grandmother is — Oh well, you know how it was when we were children."

"Yes, I know." His voice was grave. The grim smile twisted his lips.

"I'm not like that, David."

"You never were."

"Silly, isn't it?"

"I suppose so . . . But people are that way."

They talked of things that had happened a very long time ago.

"Remember the pumpkin vine?"

"And the elephant in the clouds?"

"Remember Robin Hood and the arrow that flew the wrong way?"

"And the wooden sword?"

"I have it still."

"The Archer's bull dog?"

"Remember" . . . "Remember?"

They seemed to inhabit a world of their own. The highbacked stall with the light shining through bunches of rosy grapes was a private planet far removed from the din and clatter around them, the

music, the shuffle of dancing feet, voices, trills of laughter, boys in white coats running here and there with trays and ice cream sodas. Hope and Lloyd did not return. One of the white coats brought sandwiches and cups of chocolate. He might well have been only a starched white coat. They were not conscious of his presence.

"Remember the persimmon tree, Beth?"

"And the day you fell."

"And the valentines . . ."

"And Christmas . . ."

"Remember . . . Remember . . ."

Once Elizabeth glanced around to find the girl with the brassy gold hair staring at them over the perfume counter.

"Who is she, David?"

"Amy Phelps."

"A friend of yours?"

"In a way . . . She's a good kid. Has a hard time at home." Amy was dismissed and forgotten. "Will you skate with me sometime, Beth?"

"I'd love it."

"And climb to the top of the hill?"

"Perhaps . . ."

The clatter was abruptly hushed and through the silence which followed rose the minor chords, the plaintive refrain of Hope's disturbing song.

"Fish gotta swim; birds gotta fly
I gotta love one man 'til I die.
Can't help lovin' that man of mine."

Hope sat on a table, surrounded by an admiring and respectfully silent group. She cradled the borrowed banjo in her arms and sang softly, plaintively, her head thrown back a little, her eyes raised, her gamin grin closer to tears than laughter:

"Tell me he's lazy; tell me he's slow.
Tell me I'm crazy; maybe I know.
Can't help lovin' that man of mine."

The music wove a spell about David and Elizabeth, drew them together with threads as frail as cobwebs, as strong as steel. Unconsciously Elizabeth's hands crept across the table, slipped into David's, felt the pressure of his answering clasp. For a long moment they looked steadily at each other, embarrassment gone, childish memories forgotten, seeing in each other something new and sweet and vaguely disturbing.

"He can come home as late as can be
Home without him ain't no home to me,
Can't help lovin' that man of mine."

The last minor note thinned, echoed, trembled into silence. The spell was broken. Hope shifted into a tune that was gay and impudent. Feet tapped the floor, hands kept time to the music. The gamin grin was the spirit of laughter now. Elizabeth, very much embarrassed, drew her hands away.

"Hope's voice makes you do things like that," she said and looked down at the tips of her fingers.

"She's — rather remarkable." David stared, without seeing a word, at the printed menu in its nickel holder.

"That song gives me the weary blues," Elizabeth continued. "I tried to bury half of myself when Hope sang it out home this afternoon."

"Bury yourself?" David's voice was puzzled.

"There are two Elizabeths," she explained. "A grown-up young lady who thinks it will be pleasant to give dinner parties in Cambridge and a gypsy Elizabeth who loathes heirlooms and loves adventuring. I hadn't been bothered with her for years. But she's come to life again somehow. And she must be buried, the disturbing young minx! She needs so frequently to be snubbed."

She glanced up at David half expecting him to laugh. But he did not laugh. His blue eyes were very grave.

"Don't bury her, Beth," he said softly. "The gypsy Elizabeth is a darling. I think she's the grown-up self of the little girl I used to know."

David understood. Bless him! It made her feel warm inside, warm and happy and pleasant.

"But what can I do with her, David? She's a very provoking young minx."

"Let her live until — " he faltered.

"Until June?"

He nodded.

"And then?"

"Leave her with me. She needn't go to — to Cambridge. Would she be happy with me, Beth?"

Elizabeth's heart beat with a queer breathless rhythm. The tip of her finger traced circles on the table top, dark lashes veiled her eyes.

"She used to like you, David. A very long time ago."

"Does she like me now?"

"I rather suspect that she does."

"Is it a promise?"

The dark lashes lifted. Again their eyes met across the table, amber eyes smiling up into eyes that were grave and tender and very blue.

"Until June, Beth?"

"Yes, David . . . Until June."

✲ III ✲

Uncle Randolph sat beside the fire reading the "Winchester News." He was devoted to the paper at any time but to-night he found it especially absorbing. The front page bore a smudgy reproduction of his own handsome features. The caption below informed the world (or that portion of it, at least, which subscribed to the "News") that Randolph Fairfax Lloyd, Winchester's leading citizen, had been prevailed upon to represent his county in legislative halls if that should be the will of the people. His speech of acceptance was printed in

full. A magnificent speech, Uncle Randolph decided, couched in faultless phrases. He read it once, he read it twice. He read it many times and so deep was his absorption that he was not aware of Elizabeth's presence in the room until she tweaked a lock of his hair.

"Uncle Randolph . . ."

"Eh . . . what?" The choice of the people roused from dreams of future glory. "Oh, it's you, my dear."

"I found something in the school house this afternoon." She sat on the arm of his chair swinging her slender legs.

"Yes? Well, that's very nice, I'm sure," he said in a preoccupied fashion. Uncle Randolph was mentally receiving the plaudits of enthusiastic throngs.

"In the stove," Elizabeth said. "A letter with a foreign stamp."

"What was that?" he asked sharply. "What did you say?"

Elizabeth was astonished at the change in his expression. He could not have appeared more startled if a skeleton securely locked in the family closet had suddenly emerged rattling its ancient bones.

"Just a scrap of an envelope." Elizabeth gave it to him. "I wondered about the stamp."

Uncle Randolph examined the scrap of paper and his face lost its ruddy glow.

"That all you found?" He darted a quick haunted glance at Elizabeth.

"Yes," she said in astonishment. "That and some burned bits of paper.

"Oh!" The exclamation was a gusty sigh of relief.

"Was it important, Uncle Randolph?"

"No, no, of course not. You startled me. Had my mind on something else." The ruddy glow, the genial manner returned. "That was probably a letter from Brazil. I was interested in a coffee plantation down there two or three years ago." He took up the paper again. "What do you think of that?" he asked, displaying the important front page.

"Uncle Randolph! Really? That's splendid!"

"And how's this for a speech?"

He began to read with great complacence the printed speech in the paper. Elizabeth heard not a word of the magnificent address. Two things puzzled her. Uncle Randolph had kept the scrap of envelope and the letter in the school house stove was written twenty-two years ago!

Chapter Six

❋ I ❋

HOPE returned to Boston with her songs, her nonsense and her gamin smile. "The Poplars" was dreary. Lloyd came less frequently and then only to talk about Hope. Elizabeth, held prisoner by the twisted ankle, found life rather dull.

Grandmother purchased a hope chest, exquisitely polished and carved, which Elizabeth, in accordance with the family tradition, was to fill with hand-wrought garments. She honestly tried to sew. She set countless stitches in lace and crepe-de-chine and wrote to Roger — "I am making beautiful things" — because she knew that would please him. The brides of old Salem; the sweet womanly woman he fancied her to be, would have stitched their dreams into wedding garments. Elizabeth, however, sewed only knots. The stitches wobbled. Mother secretly ripped them out and replaced them with her own which were marvels of neatness and skill. Elizabeth finally gave up the attempt. Stitching dreams into wedding garments, she decided, was obviously not her forte.

People came to call, Marjory Todd, Sally Sherman, the Tilghman girls. Elizabeth tried to make friends with them. That experiment, too, was not

an unqualified success. She had grown away from her former playmates. There were no pleasant ties to bind them with the past. They had nothing in common. When she talked of the things that interested her, they thought she was showing off. If she joined in their gossip and petty squabbles, she felt ashamed of herself. She grew to dread their visits, declined invitations as often as possible.

Sometimes Lloyd's sister, Lucile, brought her sons, Jimmy and Junior, to spend the day at "The Poplars." Elizabeth was delighted with the children but Lucile had changed. At eighteen she had been a pretty wistful young thing with shy blue eyes and a fluff of pale gold hair. The prettiness had faded; the wistful expression was more marked. She didn't look happy. Elizabeth, building block houses on the library rug one afternoon, glanced up to find Lucile crying over a half finished smock for Junior.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing — and everything," Lucile answered.

"Is it Parker, Lucile?"

"I suppose you've heard. It's no secret." Her voice was listless.

"Is he unkind?" Elizabeth disliked Parker Todd with his jokes and his easy familiarity.

"Just indifferent." Lucile bent over the smock to hide the trembling of her lips. "And there's always a woman. I think it's the Clyde girl now."

"Why do you stand for it?" Elizabeth stormed.

"What can I do? Mother wouldn't stand for a scandal and I've the children to consider."

"Well, I would do something about it," said Elizabeth sternly and then in a gentler voice. "Do you love him, Lucile?"

She shook her head. "I've never loved anyone except Don Lawrence," she said slowly.

Elizabeth remembered Don Lawrence. He had taught in the high school when Lucile was a senior. Suddenly he lost his position and went away. A short time after Lucile married Parker Todd. She remembered also, though the connection had not occurred to her before, that Uncle Randolph had then been a member of the school board.

"Why did you marry Parker, Lucile?"

"Grandmother wanted it. And Mother kept after me," Lucile said wearily. "Of course Parker was one of 'the Todds.'" Her voice, for gentle Lucile, was strangely bitter.

Elizabeth scattered the blocks with a savage kick. The children thinking it was part of the game, shouted with delight.

"Grandmother thinks she's God!" Elizabeth raged. "Trying to arrange everybody's life!" And then ashamed of her outburst, "That's my pet violence, Lucile."

"She meant it for the best, I suppose." Lucile sighed. "You never can tell. And I hadn't any

spunk. Neither has Lloyd. We've been managed all our lives."

"I wouldn't stand for it!" Elizabeth's eyes flashed. "I'd do something!"

"Yes, I know you would." Lucile smiled wanly. "But I won't. Perhaps people aren't meant to be happy. And anyway," her face brightened a little, "I have the children. That's a great deal."

They talked, then, of other things but Elizabeth remembered, thought about it very often. The seeds of rebellion planted in her heart ten years ago sent up lusty shoots. She thought, too, about the scraps of paper she had found in the school house stove, recalled the haunted expression that had leaped into Uncle Randolph's eyes when she showed him the fragment of envelope bearing the foreign stamp. His explanation had not convinced her. There was, she thought, something more to the matter. She wondered about it very often and, having nothing else to do, attempted an investigation.

"Zeke," she said one stormy afternoon. "Did Uncle Randolph know some one named David a long time — twenty two years ago?"

She sat in Lina's rocker beside the window in the tidy warm cottage kitchen. Zeke was drowsing beside the stove. He spent many hours there, smoking, mumbling to himself, wrapped in ancient reveries. Zeke was growing childish. He confused the past with the present and sometimes called her "Miss Libby."

"What fo' you ask dat, honey?" The old man roused from his reveries.

"Oh, I just wondered."

"Lawd a mercy, Gabriel hisself couldn't a kept track ob all de folks Marse Randolph knowed den!" Zeke chuckled with deep enjoyment. "He was a spo'tin' gent'man in dem days, honey. Yessuh! He could drive a hawse and spark a gal wid de best un um."

It was difficult for Elizabeth to think of Uncle Randolph as a dashing young blade. The fancy amused her.

"Tell me about him, Zeke."

"Ain't much to tell." The old negro seemed to grope through his hazy mind for forgotten details. "Jest had he fling, dat's all — same as young folks is bound to, though seem lak he flung mo' considerable. Many's de scrape Ah drug him tho' by de skin ob he teef. Him an' dat — " he paused and considered. "Pears lak ah done forgit de name."

"Was it — Warren, Zeke?"

"Wellum, seem lak it were an' den again seem lak it warn't. Things git sorta bothered in my haid. But ah recolekt way back to de time when Miss Libby done ride huh pappy's hawse clean tho' de ribber. Bless Gawd, honey, but she were a spunky critter. Handsome, too. Couldn't a gal in Verginny hold a candle to mah little miss."

He rambled on about Grandmother and things that had happened a very long time ago. Elizabeth,

with difficulty, called him back to the subject of Uncle Randolph.

"Wellum, Marse Randolph had he fling and den settled down snug as yo' please. Mah'ied Miss Stella an' jined de chu'ch." Zeke's tone indicated that he regretted the reformation. "Takes a wife to knock de foolishment out ob a spo'tin' gent'man. Lak when mah Rachel mah'ied me . . ."

He rambled on at great length, mumbling and chuckling to himself. Elizabeth abandoned the investigation. If Zeke knew anything about Uncle Randolph, that knowledge was buried deep in his hazy, childish mind. She decided that she was making a mountain out of an ant hill, dismissed the perplexing incident from her mind.

January trailed along, a succession of uneventful days. It would have been a dreary month, indeed, except for David's notes and his odd little gifts. They were friendly notes, amusing and impersonal; queer little gifts fashioned to please her, figures made from walnut shells with wire legs and grotesque features. David called them their lucky little gods. Rinthy brought a small package almost every morning; a coral butterfly, a peanut parrot with a gorgeous tail swinging in a pipe-cleaner hoop, nonsense jingles and bits of ridiculous verse. Elizabeth was delighted. Rinthy's arrival in the morning became an important event. And Rinthy blossomed out in a bewildering confusion of cast-off finery, spoils of her love for intrigue.

At last the ankle recovered. Elizabeth was free to wander where she pleased. She tramped again along the river road in a fur jacket and the scarlet tam o' shanter. Sometimes David tramped with her. He told her about the bridge, took her on tours of investigation. The climbed to the top of Laurel Hill, recalling incidents half forgotten, closing the gap of the years, exploring each other's mind and liking what they found.

Often Elizabeth stopped at Jerry's later in the afternoon when David's work was finished. The early winter twilight was a faithful friend. It gave them a pleasant hour between David's work and dinner time at "The Poplars." They sat before the fire, talked, listened to Jerry's yarns which had by no means lost their variety or fascination. Jerry played his fiddle for them, all the old tunes they had loved as children, "Missouri Gal," "Strut Miss Lizzie," "Nigger on the Corn-crib." Jerry made up in enthusiasm what he lacked in skill. His audience was not critical. They applauded and clamored for more. A pleasant comradeship encircled the three of them. Since the afternoon in the drug store there had been no suggestion of sentiment. They liked each other. Life no longer was dull for Elizabeth. The days passed very quickly.

The winter was severe. In February the river froze to unprecedented depths. Work on the bridge was temporarily checked. Elizabeth and David spent every afternoon on the ice, skating up the

river and around the bend into territory unexplored by other skaters. Elizabeth was indifferent to peering eyes and buzzing whispers. David was more sensible. He said there was no use to stir up a hornet's nest and anyway the river was nicer around the bend. Elizabeth agreed. They had no need for companions. They were content with each other and the pleasant comradeship which both of them understood.

Only at rare intervals did thoughts of the future intrude upon their happiness.

"It's nearly the last of February," David said as they lingered one evening in the winter twilight at the old boat house behind "The Poplars" which was their place for meeting and parting.

"Yes, David."

"I'll," his voice was husky. "I'll miss you, Beth."

"And I'll miss you."

They were silent for a moment, each groping for the gay words that would shatter disturbing thoughts. Then David squared his shoulders and smiled his slow grave smile.

"Until June, Beth."

"Yes, David . . . Until June."

❄ II ❄

They skated, one afternoon, up the river and around the bend. The ice was as smooth as the surface of a mirror, rimmed with frozen willows and

shaggy snow-dusted pines. Arms crossed, woolly gloved hands tightly clasped, they skimmed along, their bodies bending and slanting into the wind. Elizabeth's cheeks wore the tint of the scarlet tam o' shanter; her eyes sparkled like stars.

"David!" she gasped. "Isn't it fun?"

"Great!"

"Like flying."

"Nicer."

"Nicer than flying! Why?"

"Because we couldn't fly with our arms crossed. The wings would get tangled."

"Funny!"

"Better save your breath," he advised. "We've a long way to go."

Swiftly, silently, they sped up the river, bending and swaying together. The sky was clear, a high lovely blue, and the sun on the ice was dazzling. The wind sang in their ears, lashed their cheeks, snatched at muffler and scarf. On and on they skimmed, forgetting each other in the exhilaration of speed, in the struggle against the wind, past the deserted mill, under a covered bridge, around the second bend and into a sheltered cove.

"We made it!" Elizabeth managed.

"The North Pole!" David gasped. "We'll get our names in the paper."

They lay side by side on the snowy bank, panting and gasping for wind. Breath and speech gradually returned; consciousness of each other. David unstrapped their skates.

"Better sit on the log," he said. "It won't be nearly as cold."

Elizabeth settled on the log with her back against a tree trunk. The cove, in summer, was a favorite picnicking spot. Clumps of bushes, willows and elders and pines hedged it about, sheltered them from the wind. A circle of rocks, blackened by the smoke of forgotten fires, formed a rude open oven. David unstrapped the knapsack slung across his shoulder.

"Fire in a jiffy," he said and disappeared into the thicket.

Elizabeth heard voices, the sharp ring of an axe. She leaned against the tree trunk, warm and happy, gloriously alive. Fun to do things with David, she thought. The winter would have been dreary without him . . . Should she write Roger about this trip up the river? Better not. He never would understand. Better write about wedding plans . . . Impossible to think of grown-up things to-day . . . June was coming — Only three months away. Time enough then to bury the gypsy Elizabeth . . . Or leave her with David? That would be a pleasanter fate. She was becoming quite fond of her gypsy self. Rather a nice little thing . . .

David returned presently with an armload of sticks.

"We're in luck this time," he said. "Some men back there are cutting wood. They gave me all I could carry."

"The lucky little gods take care of us, David," Elizabeth said with a smile.

"Bless them!" He crossed the sticks in the stone oven, added leaves and bark. The fire smouldered, crackled, burst into flame.

"See," Elizabeth said. "The little gods like us, David. Even the fire behaves."

"Hungry?" he asked when the flames spurted above the border of rocks.

"Starving!"

"I have bacon and rolls and chocolate," David displayed the contents of the knapsack.

"You're a darling," Elizabeth said.

"So are you."

Their eyes met in a swift fleeting glance, recalling that moment in the drug store when Hope had croned her plaintive song. Each felt again the gossamer threads that bound them. Only for an instant. The moment passed leaving them suddenly shy. David bent over the fire. Elizabeth toyed with the fringe of her scarf, wondering, a little frightened at the hammering of her heart . . . Nonsense! . . .

"Can I help?" she asked casually.

"No thank you," he answered quite as casually. "I'm an expert cook."

He told her about a camping trip in the mountains with some of his college friends. Elizabeth's heart beat less rapidly. David no longer was shy. The old comradeship was restored. They broiled

the bacon on willow sticks, toasted the rolls, drank the chocolate from a tin cup.

"Like winter picnics?" David asked.

"Umm," she murmured, her mouth agreeably full.

He sat on the log beside her, his shoulder touching hers, his sturdy boots and her slim ones stretching together toward the fire.

"What will you do when the bridge is finished?" Elizabeth asked.

"There'll be another somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Brazil, perhaps. The firm has a contract there."

"Would you like that?"

"Yes . . . New places. I'm a gypsy, too. Couldn't stand it to work indoors. I like the sun and the wind in my face."

"It's fun to wander," Elizabeth said . . . Fun to wander with David, explore new places, watch the sunrise over the mountains, camp out under the stars . . .

"Won't you be lonely?" she asked.

"I've been lonely all my life," he answered gravely. "Except twice."

"When?"

"When you lived here before . . . And now."

"Lonely in college, David?"

"Most of the time. I worked pretty hard. It seemed only decent when Jerry was paying the bills.

And I like work. It never lets you down. Afraid of people, I guess," he added slowly. "I wasn't accustomed to friends."

"Poor David!" Elizabeth said softly and slipped her hand into his.

"The fellows were mighty decent and football was fun," he continued. "But I never seemed to belong. No background except Jerry, bless him! And I was afraid of being snubbed. I had to depend on myself. That's why I plugged away. I vowed I'd make people respect me. I vowed I would show them some day."

"You will," Elizabeth said warmly. "You're splendid, Davie Warren!"

"Not much!" he smiled. "Though I like you to say it, of course. But I'm getting along. The firm is mighty decent. I may arrive in time."

"Of course you will!"

"Do you believe in me, Beth?"

"Indeed I do."

"Then," he smiled happily, "that's all settled. The boss had better look out for his job."

"Haven't there been any . . . girls?" Elizabeth asked.

"Not many. Girls are expensive and disappointing. You see," he said simply. "I've measured them all by you."

"David! Do you build pedestals too?"

"Lord no!" his voice was impatient. "Perfection would be deadly. You weren't an angel,

young lady. You had a temper and knew how to kick. But you were brave," his voice softened, " and honest and loyal. Those are the things I've looked for in other girls, looked for and never found." He shrugged his broad shoulders. " Bunk! Who cares? You're here now and you haven't changed. Except to become rather gorgeous. You sometimes take my breath away."

" Silly! " she smiled. " I'll give it back."

" Indian giver! You'll take it again."

No other disturbing moment threatened their friendly companionship. They chattered and laughed like frolicking children, squabbled over the last toasted roll. The sun dropped lower and lower, disappeared behind the trees on the opposite bank of the river. Sunset reflections, streaks of flame and rose and gold, shimmered across the ice. Shadows filled the cove. The wind blew colder; the shaggy pine branches creaked mournfully.

" We'd better start back," Elizabeth said, reluctantly. " We've a long way to go."

David banked the fire and strapped on their skates. Silently, hands crossed and shoulders touching, they started back toward the town. The wind was behind them now, pushing them forward, whipping tendrils of bright hair against Elizabeth's cheeks. They moved swiftly, easily through the reflected glow of the sunset, until they saw, beyond the river bend, the lights of the town, the boat house beyond "The Poplars," a smudgy blur in the shadows.

"Let's keep on David," Elizabeth said dreamily.

"How long?"

"Forever and ever."

"To the end of the river?"

"To the end of the world."

"Can't," he said briefly.

"Why not?"

"Every beautiful thing must end."

An end to skating with David! The thought was not to be borne. Elizabeth realized for the first time a little of what it would mean to lose David. Tears misted her lashes. She resolutely winked them away. It was the gypsy Elizabeth who loved adventuring with David. And she was to stay. The grown-up Elizabeth would be giving dinners in Cambridge, gracious, charming, admired. The prospect seemed, at that moment, to lose its glamour. She envied her graceless gypsy self.

They skated silently through the gathering shadows, hands crossed, shoulders touching, so close to each other, so infinitely far apart. On the boat house landing, David unstrapped her skates.

"It was a nice picnic, David."

"I liked it too." He lingered a little, reluctant to part with her. There were so few days left. The future stretched bleakly ahead. This brief moment alone was his. "We'll go again if the ice holds."

"Perhaps." Elizabeth, too, was reluctant to leave the boat house landing . . . David! His

face was a white blur in the darkness . . . Don't leave me, she wanted to say. Let's be gypsies together . . . That was nonsense, beautiful nonsense, the fabric of fairy tales. Only grown-up things were real, spoons and linen and wedding lists . . .

"Good-night, David."

"Good-night, litle gypsy."

"To-morrow, David?"

"To-morrow, dear."

❋ III ❋

"Elizabeth . . ."

"Yes, Grandmother." Her eyes looked up from the fire.

"I think we'll decide on the Princess pattern, dear."

"But," said Elizabeth, dreamily, "didn't princess frocks go out of style a very long time ago?"

"Frocks!" said Grandmother crisply. "What in the world is the matter with you? I've been talking about your silver for the last hour and a half!"

Chapter Seven

❋ I ❋

SPRING came. Winchester foamed with blossoms. The tulip beds behind "The Poplars" looked like windows stolen from a cathedral, glowing circular windows set with crescents of purple and topaz and ruby red. Hyacinths shook their tinted bells in the gentle wind; crocus cups jeweled the grass. The river murmured softly, singing a song of spring time to the budding willows. Uncle Randolph was victorious in the primary election. Zeke discarded his coon-skin cap.

An atmosphere of excitement pervaded "The Poplars." This was not as other springs. Elizabeth was to be married. That event was a matter of first importance. Aunt Dolly's bronchitis, an annual catastrophe, paled into insignificance. Easter wardrobes received scant attention. Uncle Randolph's victory at the polls was sadly overshadowed. All interest was centered about the wedding.

The hope chest was filled with dainty exquisite garments and new ones were finished every day. Miss Phoebe, the retired school mistress, an energetic little old lady long ago pensioned by Grandmother but by no means afraid of her, came to help with the sewing. She wore basques and white aprons edged

with hand made lace. Her hair was twisted in a tight knot at the nape of her neck and so firmly pulled back that her brows were lifted in an expression of perpetual interrogation. Once she had ruffled Elizabeth's petticoats. Now she embroidered beautiful monograms on towels and linen sheets. Miss Phoebe was agreeable company. She had a quick wit, a mind of her own and a gift for conversation.

Mother's fingers were seldom idle though she was obliged to rest sometimes because of the pain in her side. No one else knew about the pain. There were days when she did not feel it at all. Then it would return, sharper than ever, making her feel a little faint. She wondered if she should consult a doctor but hesitated for fear of being a bother. Everyone was very busy. This certainly was no time to be ill. She dosed herself with simple remedies and did not complain.

Grandmother made elaborate plans. She was determined that Elizabeth's wedding should eclipse in brilliance and perfection of detail any similar function that Winchester had ever known. The carriage was to be repainted and the horses, also pensioned, brought in from the farm. Zeke was measured for a new coat. The last of the Lloyd brides should be conveyed to the church in a manner befitting royalty. Grandmother had never yielded gracefully to automobiles.

A memorandum pad and a tiny gold pencil

were seldom far from her hands. She jotted down duties for Mother and Lina and Miss Phoebe. She, herself, interviewed the caterer and the florist, warning them with the frosty glitter of her eyes, the proud lift of her chin, that only the best would do. She made a sacred pilgrimage to the attic, returning with cobwebby bottles which were at once consigned to the security of her carved walnut wardrobe. She directed, fussed and supervised. Grandmother was in her element. She should have been the general of an army.

She carefully pruned the invitation list.

"The Simpsons, Dolly?"

"They go everywhere, Mother."

"Well, they won't come here!"

The Simpsons were relegated to social obscurity. And then a little later:

"I don't see Letty Wynn's name."

"The poor old thing, Mother! She won't have a rag to wear."

"That makes no difference. Judge Wynn was your father's closest friend." And the Judge's shabby daughter was added to the list.

Aunt Dolly, wheezing with excitement and bronchitis, fluttered over samples of silk.

"The lilac is pretty and the pink is exquisite. But blue was always my color! Which would you decide on? And shall I have it made plain or beaded in crystal? The pink is pretty! Oh dear, I wish I could make up my mind!"

No one paid the least attention to her difficulties. But then Aunt Dolly had not expected that anyone would.

A thorough house-cleaning was inaugurated. Lina, as amiable and unrepentent a lost sheep as ever strayed from a fold, assisted by Rinthy and two of the town darkies, began in the attic, mopped their way down to the second floor. The guest rooms were re-papered. Windows were measured for new curtains. Floors were polished and woodwork enameled. A leak in the plumbing was repaired. No spot or blemish must mar the perfect whole.

Aunt Julia's huge brick house on Chestnut street shared the excitement. Lucile was to be the matron of honor and Jimmy and Junior, in velvet trousers, were to carry the train. Aunt Julia was to entertain some of the out of town guests. She fretted with Grandmother over the list.

"But you'll have Roger and Hope, Mother. Why not let me have Mr. and Mrs. Embree?"

"Certainly not, Julia. Their place is here."

"But Mother—"

"We won't discuss it. I have arranged everything. You are to have the Boston aunts."

That settled the matter. Aunt Julia might dictate to woman's clubs and manage the hospital board. But Grandmother was undisputed sovereign of "The Poplars," the court of last appeal in family affairs.

So April passed and May drew near. Elizabeth's mood varied. There were times when she, too, shared the excitement, exclaiming over gifts, approving Grandmother's plans. It was pleasant to display the dainty trifles of ribbon and lace, to hear the chattering chorus:

"They're lovely!"

"Beautiful!"

"I've never seen such adorable things!"

Sally and Marjory and the Tilghman girls grouped about Elizabeth's bed, cheeks flushed, eyes sparkling with envy and admiration.

"Real lace!"

"And hand tucks!"

"These cunning slippers!"

"Betty Lloyd! You lucky girl!"

Then Elizabeth would feel that she was lucky, indeed, and pity the Tilghmans who seemed destined to become the fading spinsters of another generation. Lucky Elizabeth, admired and petted and envied. Going to marry Roger, to live in a square white house with shady elms and glimpses of the river. Lucky, lucky Elizabeth, the flower of the royal family.

But there were other moods. The spring twilights, fragrant with lilacs, achingly sweet, filled her with restless fancies. Then she walked with David along the river road, both of them silent, clinging to each other in thought, dreading the separation. The pleasant comradship was only a memory now. It

became increasingly difficult to be gay and cheerful. Familiar objects no longer were friendly; the river, the willows, the stars. Tears frequently misted Elizabeth's eyes. Sad to think that filmy green branches would sway above the water, that ferns would uncurl along the bank, that the honeysuckle would continue to scatter its fragrance when she was far away and David tramped the river road alone.

She did not ask herself if she loved him. The emotion was too vague for that. She knew only that the thought of losing him was intolerable. They lingered each evening at the gate in the garden wall, quiet, thoughtful, reluctant to part, treasuring the moments. So few, so pitifully few were left.

"It's been fun, hasn't it, David?"

"More than that. I've never been so happy."

"We won't forget."

"Forget, Beth? . . . Never."

Elizabeth grew thin and lost her appetite. Mother worried about it.

"Are you ill, darling?"

"Of course not."

"Is everything all right?"

"Fine. I'm having the time of my life." And she set off for a party at Marjory Todd's, so lovely, so radiant that Mother decided her worry had been foolish.

There were a great many parties for Elizabeth. Her room was cluttered with shower gifts. Favors trailed across her dresser, the wee paper parasols

from Sally's party. Lucile's candle sticks, the Tilghman's satin slippers which had been filled with mauve and lilac sweet peas. Wash brought a little pile of invitations with the mail every morning. All Winchester begged for the privilege of sharing the excitement. Grandmother was delighted and Aunt Dolly quite lost her head. Elizabeth's cheeks lost their rounded curves. She used more rouge. Her eyes sometimes were moody and sometimes feverishly bright.

The wedding invitations came from Tiffany's. Thick creamy paper expensively engraved. They lay in the drawers of the library desk folded about with tissue paper. Mother addressed a few of them every night, working carefully for fear of smudges and blots. Sometimes the letters blurred, not because of the pain in her side but because Elizabeth was going away. She consoled herself with the thought that Elizabeth would be well established. Life for Mother had ended in a tiny frame shack on the edge of the desert. She cared for nothing save the happiness of her beautiful child.

One evening she noticed that two names had been added to the invitation list in Elizabeth's own writing — Jerry Crockett and David Grant Warren. The latter was blotted a little as though a drop of water had been spilled on the paper. Mother decided simply to overlook the addition. She felt that she could not endure another scene. Elizabeth's loyalty to the Warren boy puzzled her now as it had

puzzled her nearly ten years ago. But then, she thought, Phillip had been like that, always befriending stray puppies and forlorn human wrecks. Though the Warren boy was certainly not a wreck. Nice looking and very well mannered. Still it would be safer not to send the invitations. If there should be a question about it later, she would take the blame. To get Elizabeth safely and peaceably married was her only desire. After that let the heavens fall.

A momentary shadow threatened. Aunt Julia rustled into the library one afternoon in a fine state of excitement.

"Mother," she announced. "There's something I think you should know."

Grandmother looked up from one of her endless lists.

"Sit down and get your breath, Julia," she said calmly. "You'll have a stroke one of these days." And she continued to make notes with the small gold pencil.

"It's about Elizabeth!" Aunt Julia, audibly panting, sank into the nearest chair. "And Heaven only knows how long it's been going on!"

"Start at the beginning," said Grandmother briefly. "And perhaps I'll have some vague idea of what you mean."

Aunt Julia delivered her news like a bolt from the blue.

"She's been sneaking out to meet that Warren boy!"

Mother, threading ribbon through wisps of lace, held her breath. Surely now there would be a scene! Lovely, wilful child! Why would she do things like that?

"Are you sure about that, Julia?" asked Grandmother mildly.

"Roxy saw them last night. Walking along the river. Hand in hand, if you please. I thought you should be informed. You know how she's always been about that boy."

For a moment there was silence. Aunt Julia waited expectantly. Mother's fingers shook so that the bodkin dropped into her lap.

"I wouldn't have a stroke over it, Julia," Grandmother said calmly. "Don't get excited. And tell Roxy to hold her tongue. I can manage the child."

Aunt Julia was visibly disappointed.

"Well, if anything happens," she said in a voice which anticipated the worst," please remember that I warned you."

"I will, Julia," said Grandmother dryly. "That will be a great consolation, I'm sure." And forthwith she tactfully changed the subject.

Elizabeth never knew about Aunt Julia's discovery. She merely wondered why Grandmother seemed suddenly to have arranged something for every waking hour. But Mother thought of it very often. A small ghost of worry haunted her day and night.

"Is everything all right, dear?" she would ask anxiously.

"Yes, Mother, of course."

"I mean, you're happy about it? You aren't fretting?"

"What in the world would I fret about?"

"I just wondered. You're so thin."

"And you're a sweet goose. It's appropriate to grow worn and wasted before the wedding. Come see what Roger has sent. It's an emerald collar. Honestly! Is it for the dog, do you reckon, or must I wear it myself?"

The ghost of worry was banished for the moment. But it often returned. Sometimes it bothered Mother more than the pain in her side. Elizabeth *must* be happy. Nothing else mattered at all.

The days passed, each filled to the brim with activity. Elizabeth was feverishly gay. But she ate scarcely anything and often in the morning her pillow was damp with the tears she had shed in her sleep. Mother and Miss Phoebe finished the wedding gown. It hung in the guest room closet, a slim sheath of ivory satin misted over with the delicate yellowed folds of Grandmother's veil. At night when she could not sleep Elizabeth would creep in to look at it, tiptoeing softly for fear of waking somebody. There were times when she found it hard to believe that she was actually to be married. The ivory gown convinced her. Grandmother's

veil, like Grandmother herself, could not be disregarded.

A shopping trip to New York was planned for the first of May. They were all going; Grandmother, Mother, Aunt Dolly and Elizabeth. From there Elizabeth was to go to Salem to be fêted by the Embrees. Elizabeth had objected but Grandmother made her plans regardless. Aunt Julia's discovery had caused her to realize the importance of keeping Elizabeth occupied. Nothing must be allowed to happen. There had never been an open scandal in the family. Grandmother did not doubt her own powers. But she thought it wiser to leave nothing to chance.

Uncle Randolph had also approved. Aunt Julia found in him a more satisfactory listener. Her bolt from the blue had left him white and shaken. Indeed, it had seemed for a time that Uncle Randolph might suffer the stroke predicted for Aunt Julia. He had raged and paced the floor all one night. But Elizabeth did not know that. If she had, she might have recalled a perplexing incident forgotten weeks ago. But Grandmother had decreed that Elizabeth should not be troubled and Grandmother's decrees were law, even to Uncle Randolph.

The night before the expedition Elizabeth slipped quietly out the back door and down the garden walk to meet David at the boat house. The sky was patterned with stars and the moon rose over

the treetops, spraying the garden with silver. She walked slowly beneath the arbor and along the path to the gate in the wall. She felt somehow that this was the last time she and David would meet beneath the willows and her heart ached with a dull restless pain. The beauty of the night increased her sadness. The faun on the fountain wore silver spangles; the fragrance of the lilacs was breathlessly sweet. A bird in the apricot tree trilled plaintively, singing a song of farewell to David and Elizabeth. She paused for a moment at the gate, brushed her cheek against the lilac plumes. Tears trembled on her lashes, splintering the world into crystals. A lump knotted in her throat and her lips formed the words that welled up in her heart:

"Good-bye, David . . . Good-bye, my David . . . Good-bye."

❋ II ❋

They sat on the boat house landing, silently, side by side, watching the stars reflected in the water, hearing the murmur of the willows brushed by the passing wind.

"What are you thinking?" David asked after a long interval of silence.

"About . . . the bird in the apricot tree."

"Was it singing, Beth?"

"Such a sad song! Over and over. 'Good-bye, David, Good-bye.'"

"Is this . . . good-bye?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Why? It isn't . . . June."

"I'm going away to-morrow."

"But you're coming back, aren't you, Beth?"

"Of course. In a week or two. But there'll be so much to do. Parties and dinners and clothes and — Oh, millions of things."

"I know." His voice was grave. His hands gripped the edge of the landing.

"You may take the gypsy Elizabeth home with you to-night."

"Does she want to go?"

"She belongs to you, David," Elizabeth said with a catch in her voice. "No one else has ever known her. Be kind to her. She's rather a nice little thing."

"Are you sorry to lose her?"

"I envy her, David."

"Do you mean that, Beth?"

"It's — it's fun to adventure with you. Lucky little gypsy." Her voice thinned to a wistful thread of sound. "It never can happen again."

"No," he said thoughtfully. "Never . . ."

His voice trailed off into silence, met and mingled with the murmur of the willows, the soft wash of the river against the bank. Elizabeth stirred restlessly. A full realization of what it would mean to lose David swept over her plunging her fathoms deep in desolation. Never to see him

again, his deep blue eyes, his crooked smile, the forward thrust of his chin. Never to walk with him along the winding river road, climb to the top of the hill, sit with him beside the fire while Jerry played "Missouri Gal" and the assorted clocks ticked away the fleeting moments. Never to wake in the morning happy because she would see him. Never to fall asleep remembering his smile. Never . . . Never . . .

"David!" she said with a startled little cry and slipped her hand into his.

"Are you feeling sorry for me, Beth?" he asked gruffly.

"No David . . . Sorry for me."

"Why?" The hand which held hers trembled a little.

"Because I can't be a gypsy with you, camping out under the stars . . . watching the sun rise over the mountains . . ."

"You'd hate it." He did not look at her. His eyes were fixed on the wavering reflection of the stars in the river. "There'd be bugs and snakes, perhaps, and ashes in the flap jacks."

"There'd be . . . you," she said in a very small voice indeed.

"Bunk!" His voice was husky. "You'd hate it, Beth," he said as though he were convincing himself.

"I," she faltered. "I'm so fond of you, David."

"Beth . . . darling!" His voice lost its

gruffness. He drew her into the circle of his arms, held her tightly. "My Beth . . . ."

"Let's go away. Let's just be gypsies together."

"We can't," he said grimly. "We never can do that."

"Aren't you fond of me, David?"

"I adore you."

"You've never told me."

"I hadn't the right."

"What's right and what's wrong?" she asked wearily. "Does anybody know? I've thought about it until my head spins. Let's go away, David. Nothing else matters but you and me."

"No, Beth. Other things matter . . . Your Family . . ."

"I don't care about them!" She was crying a little now, her head against his shoulder. "I can't bear to lose you, David."

"You show very poor taste, young lady." His face was a strained white blur in the darkness. The grim smile twisted his lips. "I'm just a hoodlum, I guess. People haven't forgotten about . . . my father."

"People are stupid!" she said with a quick flash of anger. "It wasn't your fault!"

"No . . . But it might just as well have been. It's shadowed me all my life. I couldn't inflict my old man of the sea on you."

"I don't care!" she protested. "We could go away."

"Never far enough," he said bitterly and then in a softer tone, "I love you, Beth. I've always loved you . . . Do you see that star up there?" He gently tilted her chin. "That's you . . . Years ago I found a quotation in Jerry's junk pile — "

"The wagon and the star? I remember that — "

"I hitched my wagon to you," David continued. "Everything I've ever done in my life has been for you. And that's true, Beth," he said gravely. "You called me your friend. I had never had a . . . friend."

"Yes, David . . . I know."

"But it's all bunk! Like magic and fairies and Santa Claus. God knows I've stuck to the wagon seat. And where am I?"

"Here on the boathouse landing with me."

"Only for a moment. You're still as far away as the star up there. Jerry's right. Junk won't mix with diamond ear drops, not even if you call it antiques."

"You're so noble, David." She nestled against his shoulder with a weary sigh, feeling beneath her cheek the dear scratchy roughness of his coat. "Please don't be noble with me."

"Noble? Bunk! I'd fight an army or two and carry you off if I thought we had a chance. But we haven't. Your family wouldn't let us be happy. They'd find some way to make you hate me. I couldn't bear that. Don't you see?"

"Yes . . . I know. And I've given my

word," she said slowly. "It's too late to fight armies now."

"I've thought I couldn't bear to lose you." His arms tightened about her. "But I can bear it — for you."

"David!" she said almost sharply. "You mustn't be noble!"

"You're such a child, Beth, — underneath. And I've been old all my life . . . Let's not spoil it with unhappiness . . . Want a handkerchief?"

"Please."

He wiped away the tears, kissed her brow and her eyes, the trembling curve of her lips. "No tears, Beth."

"No tears, David," she repeated as though it were an obligation which must be fulfilled.

They walked under the willows to the gate in the garden wall.

"Good-night, my Beth."

"Good-night . . . David."

He kissed her brow and her lips, held her for a moment close in his arms. Then he was gone, swinging along the river road they never would travel again. His figure merged into the shadows, dimmed, vanished. Elizabeth stood quite still, her eyes straining after him through the shadows, feeling as though the nicest part of herself had died. Moonlight silvered the garden. The fragrance of the lilacs filled the air. And the bird in the apricot tree trilled over and over its plaintive song of farewell.

"Good-bye, David . . . Good-bye, my David . . . Good-bye."

❋ III ❋

Jerry roused suddenly in the middle of the night. He fancied that David had called him. Hastily he threw back the covers and thrust his feet into slippers beside the bed. As he opened the door, the clocks downstairs chimed three.

A pencil line of light shone under David's door across the hall. Jerry knocked, called him softly. There was no answer. He turned the knob and opened the door.

David lay, fully dressed, on the bed. His face in the glow of the lamplight was pale and drawn. There were new lines around his mouth and shadows beneath his eyes. He slept the sleep of utter exhaustion, his head pillowed on his arm. Beside him on the bed lay a book, a slim water stained copy of "The Idylls of the King" with a quotation written in faded ink on the flyleaf.

Jerry understood. He pulled a cover over David, tucking it gently around his shoulders, smoothing it over his sturdy legs.

"You've got to learn for yourself, David, me lad," he said softly. "But I'd rather it had happened to me."

And because there was no one to watch, he neither coughed nor blew his nose.

Chapter Eight

❋ I ❋

ELIZABETH sat on the boathouse landing in the purple shadows of a later spring twilight. But this time she sat alone, curled up in a drift of taffeta ruffles, the fringe of her embroidered shawl trailing across the worn planking, her eyes fixed upon the wavering reflection of an early star. The lilacs were gone but the air was fragrant with wild honeysuckle and the mint that grew among the ferns. Lina was singing in the cottage . . . "Swing low sweet chariot — Comin' fo' to carry me home". . . The mournful strains mingled with the wind in the willows fitted agreeably the gentle melancholy of Elizabeth's thoughts. She leaned against a tottering post, still, quite still, her fingers laced over her heart, while the shadows deepened and the slim silver crescent of a new moon rose above the trees on the opposite shore.

Soon she must return to the house. Roger was here. And Hope. They had returned with her from Salem and Hope was to stay for the wedding now less than a month away. To-night Lloyd and Lucile and Parker Todd were coming for bridge. Presently she must go back to them, smiling and radiant, the traditionally happy bride. Just now

smiles seemed impossible. She dreaded the long evening, wanted only to be left there alone with the shadows, the honeysuckle, the misty reflection of the star. Alone with memories of David and that last night beneath the willows.

She had not seen him since her return to Winchester. Sometimes the restless longing almost drove her to Jerry's. Just to see him again, his deep blue eyes, his crooked smile! But she did not go. She felt that neither of them could endure another farewell. Better that the bird in the apricot tree should have trilled for them their last good-bye. Another meeting might leave them with bitter regrets to mar the enchanted interlude. Elizabeth had no regrets. Only the aching sadness, the longing to see him that troubled her day and night.

She was weary . . . so weary. Worn out with the battle she had fought for the last two weeks, a battle that never was ended. Sleep was only a truce. In the morning she was obliged to start over again. Fighting, always fighting, while shadows with hands and voices fitted frocks on her in the New York shops . . . "Madame is charming! Dolores, Celeste, is she not exquisite? Such slimness! Such beauty! Such chic!" . . . Empty phrases lost in the conflict that raged within her heart.

"Which do you prefer, Elizabeth?"

"What, Grandmother? . . . Oh, I don't care."

"Haven't you any interest in this!" Very crisply from Grandmother.

"Of course," Elizabeth would say and ask to have the frocks fitted again. Then she would turn and twist before the long, rose shaded mirrors, so gay and so enthusiastic that even Grandmother was satisfied.

"We'll take all three," Grandmother would say and write a check and sweep magnificently out of the shop followed by respectful glances.

The battle continued. In taxies and theatres, in the jeweler's where they selected gifts for the bridesmaids; in fur, in hat, in glove shops; crossing the crowded streets, dining at the hotel. Elizabeth was scarcely conscious of Aunt Dolly's chatter, of Grandmother's regal gestures, of the anxiety in Mother's eyes. They were shadows. Nothing was real but David and the realization that she had lost him forever.

Sometimes she thought that she must tell them. She fancied what they would say when she announced quite simply that she was not going to marry Roger. The words would form on her lips, trembling, eager to be spoken. Then she would think of Roger, his kindness when Father died, their pleasant hours together which now seemed so vague, so very far away, almost as though they never had happened at all. Roger was proud. Even if he did not love her he would be horribly hurt. And he did love her. She couldn't hurt Roger, his family and hers. Better to be lonely. Was it? How could she be happy knowing she had hurt them all? David . . . Roger

. . . love . . . loyalty . . . Over and over the same dreary round until she felt that she would fly into a million pieces and almost wished that she might.

One evening at dinner the orchestra played Hope's disturbing song. Elizabeth, curled up on the boathouse landing, recalled the utter desolution of that moment. She had cried. Tears which she could not control spilled down over her cheeks . . . "Fish gotta swim; birds gotta fly. I gotta love one man till I die . . ." The hotel dining-room had vanished. She had seen the stall in the Winchester drug store, the lights in the rosy glass grapes, David's eyes smiling at her across the table. She had loved him then. Before that. The night he carried her down the snowy slope of Laurel Hill. And even before that. Years ago when both of them were children.

She knew then that she must tell them. Again the words formed on her lips. Again they were checked. This time by the misery in Mother's eyes. It would be Mother who would suffer the wrath of the family. Poor timid little Mother, dependent upon them for everything. She couldn't do that to Mother. Try as hard as she might she could not steel herself against the misery in Mother's eyes. The words remained unspoken but the tears continued to spill down over her cheeks. Aunt Dolly was excited, Grandmother's serenity remained unruffled.

"Girls always act that way before a wedding," she had said calmly. "Julia fell off fifteen pounds and Lucile cried for days. Stop it, Elizabeth," she had added. "You're spoiling your frock." And then she had serenely ordered French pastry for desert. Grandmother thought that Elizabeth should be happy. Therefore Elizabeth was. And nothing short of an earthquake could have altered that belief.

The Salem festivities had been an ordeal. Elizabeth interestingly pale, lovely in the New York frocks, had met people, smiled, made the appropriate remarks. And all the time she had moved through a dream, wondering wistfully when it would be over. Roger, of course, was aware of her detachment.

"Look here, Beth. You're worn out."

"Just a little tired."

"We'll stay home to-night. Can't have you getting sick."

Alone with Roger? No. Not that . . . Not yet . . .

"Aunt Victoria would be disappointed. I'm all right." And she forced back into her eyes a convincing sparkle.

Roger decided that girls were like that. It was an Embree tradition that his Mother had fainted in the church vestry while the organist played the preliminary bars of the wedding march. He was pleased that Elizabeth should consider mar-

riage a serious affair. Thank God, she was sensitive and sweet and old fashioned. He was very tender with her and carried constantly a bottle of smelling salts though it made an unsightly bulge which marred the perfection of his evening attire.

Hope was less easy to deceive.

"Matter, Gorgeous?"

"Nothing . . ."

"Come on now! Can't fool little bright eyes."

"Nothing, I tell you."

"You're thin as a rail."

"That's fashionable."

"And I don't like the look in your eyes."

"Sorry . . . I aim to please."

"Beth, you don't have to marry Roger."

"I want to."

"Liar!"

"Of course I do."

"All right. It's your funeral."

"Hope!"

"Wedding, then. All right, Gorgeous. It's time to dress again."

They had inspected the house in Cambridge. It was not square and white but a somber gray with bulging bay windows and cypress trees which cut off any possible view of the river. But it was located on the correct street and contained a study which had been used by some famous person or other. That recommended it to Roger.

"Like it, Beth?"

"Why yes . . . It's nice."

Roger, complacent and mildly excited, displayed the charms of their future establishment.

"Peach of a study, isn't it Beth?"

"I'm sure it will be quiet."

"And here's your room. Do you like the paper Mother selected?"

"What? . . . Oh yes, dear. It's sweet."

"And this is the living room. We'll put the clock here and the secretary there and my clipper model . . ."

Roger bustling about, arranging his Salem gods. Roger who was only a shadow like the others. The house, too, was a shadow. Nothing was real but David, the old boathouse, the fragrance of the lilacs . . .

And now she was too tired to struggle any longer. What was the use? The outcome of the battle had been decided years before she was born. Nothing, she thought, happened by chance. She must forget everything except the fact that she was to be Roger's wife. That was the decent thing to do. She must stop moping and fretting and making everybody uncomfortable. She must never come to the boathouse landing again. Nobody could be miserable forever. It was cowardly to be licked by a single incident, to spoil a delightful memory with tears and heartache. There must be some measure of happiness ahead. She was fond of Roger. It wasn't his fault . . .

"Hook!" she said and her chin lifted proudly. She rose from the landing, smoothed out her ruffles, drew the shawl tightly around her slim body, a gay silken armour embroidered with gold poppies and blue-green humming birds, an armour for Elizabeth who had determined to be brave. Without a backward glance she walked up the path and through the gate in the garden wall.

A glimmer of white, a flash of scarlet moved towards her under the arbor.

"Beth!" called Hope. "Where in the world have you been?"

"Walking . . ."

"I've looked for you everywhere. Thought perhaps you had flung yourself into the river."

"Too wet," she said with a smile that was not forced.

"Well, come on. Somebody's waiting to see you."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know. Looks like a character out of a Dickens novel. And he refuses to go until he sees you. Though I must say he didn't receive a very cordial welcome . . . Hey there! Wait a minute!"

Hope found herself addressing empty air. Elizabeth was running swiftly toward the house, shawl trailing, ruffles billowing, gilt slippers flashing through the shadows.

"Well I'll be darned!" murmured Hope and set off after her as fast as she could travel.

❋ II ❋

"It's Jerry! I know it is!" Elizabeth thought as she ran breathlessly toward the house. "Something has happened to David!"

She heard Hope's voice, the sound of her feet running along the path. But she did not stop. One idea whirled round and round in her head. Something had happened to David! Her skirt caught on the trellis. She snatched at it impatiently, gathered the torn ruffles into her hand. On and on she sped, past the fountain and the tulip beds, up the steps, into the kitchen, through the dining-room and into the hall.

"Elizabeth!" Grandmother called sharply from the music room.

She sped like a whirlwind through the mulberry portieres, cheeks blazing, amber eyes dark with anxiety, disheveled, frantic, gasping for breath. The room seemed full of people. She saw in a flash Grandmother's frosty eyes, Uncle Randolph's ruddy face almost purple with rage, Roger's lips set in a thin firm line; Aunt Dolly nervously shuffling cards, the silken bulk of Aunt Julia, Mother's hands folded against her heart, Lucile and Lloyd and Parker Todd. And she saw something else, a thin wiry little gnome of a man standing beside the piano, twirling his hat in his hands.

"Jerry!" she cried, forgetting all the others.

"What is it? Has something happened to David?"

"He's been hurt," Jerry answered and his eyes beneath the bristling brows were as anxious as her own.

"Badly?" She steadied herself against the piano, felt the floor slipping away from under her feet.

"Can't tell yet. It happened down at the bridge. I'm sorry to be a bother." His eyes strayed about the room, ignored the others, returned to her. "But he's been talking about you. We thought it might help if you'd come."

"Of course, Jerry," she said faintly. "Right away."

"Elizabeth!" said Grandmother sternly. "Have you lost your mind?"

"David is hurt," she answered dully as though that were sufficient explanation.

"You can't go there alone." Grandmother's voice scattered slivers of ice through the quiet room.

"Oh dear! Of course not!" wailed Aunt Dolly. "Just think what people would say!"

"I don't care." Elizabeth glanced scornfully at Aunt Dolly, giddy little weather-vane, shuffling cards with nervous jeweled fingers. What did Aunt Dolly know about anything? "I don't care," she repeated. "David is hurt."

"Well, I care," said Grandmother crisply. "I won't have people talking. You are not to go to that house."

"I've been there before," Elizabeth answered quietly.

"What did I tell you?" Aunt Julia demanded triumphantly.

Grandmother's eyes were like bits of blue ice beneath her lifted brows.

"You display a strange choice of friends, Elizabeth."

"No harm's come to her there." Jerry straightened his bent shoulders. There was about him a dignity not at all amusing. "Nor ever will," he added, his brows fiercely bristling.

"I dare say." Grandmother looked straight through him. "Still I think you will agree with me that your home is scarcely a suitable visiting place for one of my family."

Jerry did not answer. He twirled his hat in his hands and gazed off across the room as though he was not thinking of Grandmother at all but of David back in the tumbling stone house waiting for them to come.

Angry words rushed to Elizabeth's lips. There it was again! The family, sacred and all powerful! Bunk! She wanted to tell them what she thought of Grandmother's precious family. But what was the use? Like bumping your head against a wall. And David was hurt.

"I don't want to quarrel, Grandmother," she said gently. "I'm sorry if it displeases you. But David is my friend. I must go with Jerry. Don't you see that I must?"

Her eyes, dark with anxiety, shadowed by misty lashes, pled with Grandmother to understand this thing that she must do. She was lovely and very appealing standing there against the piano, her hands tightly clasped, the shawl with the golden poppies slipping from one smooth shoulder, the color faded from her cheeks, the warm red curve of her lips trembling a little. But Grandmother did not relent.

"Aside from everything else," she said coldly. "I think you show very little consideration for Roger."

Roger! She had for the moment completely forgotten him. Now she turned to him with an eager little rush.

"You understand, don't you Roger?" she asked gently. "This has nothing to do with you or me. It can in no way change anything that we have planned. I'll come back soon. But I must go with Jerry now."

If Roger would understand! She almost held her breath waiting for the words that would endear him to her for life. But Roger missed his opportunity. The lean grim angle of his jaw did not relax. His eyes behind the bone rimmed glasses were puzzled and angry and hurt. Just so, Elizabeth thought, one of his ancestors might look in the act of condemning a witch to be burned. And perhaps for no greater fault than her own, simple loyalty to a friend. No help from Roger!

"Do as you like," he said briefly as though the affair was not a matter of concern to him.

"Very well." Her voice no longer was gentle. "All right Jerry. I'm ready."

But Uncle Randolph could endure no more. He rose in a towering rage, upsetting a table, sending an ash tray clattering to the floor.

"Elizabeth!" he thundered.

"Yes Uncle Randolph?" She looked up at him calmly, not at all afraid. It occurred to her, strangely enough, that there was fear mingled with the rage that tinged his handsome features a deep and unlovely purple. She thought, also, that temper was not becoming to Uncle Randolph, that he looked silly rather than commanding.

"I forbid you to leave the house!" he said in a terrible voice.

"I'm afraid you can't do that, Uncle Randolph," she said quietly.

"I can't, can't I?" He seemed indeed on the verge of a stroke.

"I don't think so. You see it isn't your house and I don't owe you even . . . gratitude."

"Elizabeth!" cried Mother faintly.

"You're in love with that boy!" accused Uncle Randolph, so far forgetting his dignity as to shake a finger at Elizabeth. "And he's a common hoodlum after the money!" Those words only were distinguishable. The flood of eloquence which followed was incoherent though "bad blood" and "hoodlum" appeared at intervals.

Elizabeth listened quietly until such a time as Uncle Randolph was obliged to pause for breath.

"I have been fond of David since we were children," she said quietly, wondering a little why she, too, did not fly into a rage. "He is my friend. Nothing that you can say will prevent me from going with Jerry."

"Do you hear that, Mother?" Uncle Randolph, feeling himself to be helpless, appealed to Grandmother. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Elizabeth knows my wishes," said Grandmother and she looked, all at once, tired and old and unhappy.

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth said quietly but with unshaken purpose. "This is something that I must do."

"You'll rue it, young lady," warned Uncle Randolph. "Mark my words!"

Elizabeth's chin lifted proudly. Mother, trembling in her chair, recognized the danger signal and uttered a faint little moan. But there was no storm.

"I think you are all making a great deal of fuss about nothing," she said in cool even tones. Her eyes moved slowly from Uncle Randolph's furious countenance to Grandmother's, still and rigid, an ivory mask set with two bright turquoise beads. "If anyone has disgraced the family tonight, it isn't I."

In the brief interval of silence which followed

the words her clear amber eyes continued their steady march around the room. She saw Aunt Dolly fumbling with the cards; Aunt Julia's impressive features wreathed in an expression half of triumph and half of horror; Uncle James, silent and sallow, not even a Lloyd by marriage, poor dear; Roger standing beside Grandmother's chair, proud and angry and hurt, Roger who had missed his opportunity; Mother, pale with fright, her hands clasped over her heart; Lucile and Lloyd and Parker Todd; and poised against the mulberry portieres, Hope, her gamin smile suppressed, a dozen mischievous sprites dancing in her tilted dark eyes. Suddenly Elizabeth laughed, peal after peal of hysterical mirth.

"You think it's funny?" roared Uncle Randolph.

"Ridiculous!" she gasped. "Like an old fashioned melodrama, perfect in every detail. Royalty in a rage!" Then, as suddenly, she was grave. "I'm sorry," she said gently. "But David needs me. We're going now."

She wrapped the shawl about her slender body, a silken armour gay with poppies and blue-green humming birds. Without another word or a backward glance she slipped her arm through Jerry's and together they marched out of the room, accompanied by invisible banners and the blowing of far away trumpets.

Complete silence followed for a moment the echoing slam of the wide front door. Then —

"What did I tell you, Mother?" Aunt Julia demanded again.

But Grandmother did not answer. For the first time in her vigorous life Elizabeth Randolph Lloyd had fainted dead away.

❋ III ❋

Elizabeth sat in a low rocker beside David's bed, holding fast to his hand. The room was very still. Shadows cast by the shaded lamp flickered across the ceiling. The curtains at the open window stirred gently blown by the rising wind. Jerry kept vigil in David's shabby chair, his anxious eyes peering toward the bed. At intervals he tiptoed across the room to lay his hand on Elizabeth's bright hair and exchange with her a glance of complete understanding. Silently, patiently, they waited for David to regain consciousness.

Elizabeth had no idea how long she had been sitting there in the dim shadowy room watching David's face unfamiliar beneath the white turban of bandages. Twice the doctor had come and gone telling them nothing save that they must wait. She was not conscious of weariness, only the anxiety that lay like a weight on her heart. David roused at times, muttered incoherent phrases. He did not recognize her but he groped for her hand if she drew it away, moved restlessly until he felt again her cool fingers against his wrist.

The scene in the music room at "The Poplars" seemed to have happened a very long time ago. She could not now recall it clearly. Nothing mattered except that David should open his eyes and know her. She bent over him, talking so softly that Jerry on the opposite side of the room heard only the low murmur of her voice.

"There was a boy named David," she said very softly her head beside his on the pillow. "Don't you remember, dear? A sturdy grave little boy with a wooden sword and freckles across his nose. And a girl named Elizabeth who wore a red tam o'shanter. Don't you remember her, Davie? A wilful tawny-haired little girl who loved you very much. There was a pumpkin vine, too. And pumpkins as yellow as gold on Miss Phoebe's roof. And castles in the clouds. Only not an elephant, Davie, a ship with sails puffed out in the wind . . . Don't you remember, dear?"

His eyes opened slowly but there were no memories in them. He moved restlessly, mumbled, closed his eyes again.

Elizabeth's heart grew heavier as the clock on the mantel ticked the anxious moments away. What if David should die? What if the bird in the apricot tree should have trilled for them an eternal farewell? The thought was not to be borne. She buried her face in the counterpane and sobbed softly to ease the ache in her heart.

Presently she felt a gentle pressure on the hand

that held David's. She raised her head. He was looking at her and there was a puzzled wondering expression in his deep blue eyes.

"Beth . . ." he said faintly.

"Yes, David . . ."

"It's you, isn't it?" he said in a tone of deep content. Then his expression changed. He seemed to remember something else, something which had for a time been lost in the haze of delirium. "It's bunk, Beth," he said with a weary sigh. "The wagon and the star . . ."

"No it isn't, David." She rested her cheek against his hand. "Here I am."

And she knew in her heart that whatever happened she never would leave him again.

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Chapter Nine

❋ I ❋

GRANDMOTHER lay in her carved walnut bed beneath a tufted cover of heliotrope satin. Very small, very helpless she looked against the pile of lace trimmed pillows. You would not have thought that she could seriously threaten anybody's happiness. But an indomitable will, an arrogant pride lived within the fragile shell of her body. That was the secret of Grandmother's power — that and the gilt-edged securities locked in the vaults of the Winchester bank.

A rose-shaded lamp on a table beside the bed made a small pool of light in the dim vastness of the room. It was an enormous room crowded with the magpie hoardings of half a hundred years. Nothing had been changed. The heavy walnut furniture carved with grapes and gilded leaves, the long mirror, the wardrobe, the desk had for fifty years occupied the same positions. Photographs of the children at various ages hung against the walls in company with works of art popular when Grandmother was a bride. When last the wall paper had needed to be renewed, they had, by a miracle, found the same pattern of satin stripes and wisteria blossoms further embellished by love birds in amorous

pairs. Fashions might come and fashions might go, Grandmother clung tenaciously to the traditions of the past.

The room had a smell peculiar to Grandmother, a mingling of lavender and peppermint and camphor and age. The smell was never completely dissipated. The mistress of "The Poplars" was skeptical about fresh air. To-night one of the windows overlooking the garden was raised a little and the fragrance of early roses drifted in between the heliotrope curtains. More powerful than the breath of the roses or the accustomed smells was the pungent odor of violet ammonia with which Aunt Dolly bathed her own agitated brow.

"Can't I rub your head, Mother?" she asked fluttering over to the bed in a pale blue negligee smothered with swan's-down. "It's a great comfort."

"Take it away!" said the little old lady. "I can't abide the stuff."

"But it would help you," Aunt Dolly persisted. "It brings me right out of a fainting spell."

"Fiddlesticks!" It did not please Grandmother to be reminded of her momentary weakness. "That was nothing. A touch of indigestion. I never could eat pound cake."

"But you must be careful," worried Aunt Dolly. "At your age anything might bring on a stroke."

"You'd think I was Methuselah!" said Grand-

mother irritably. "Don't crow too soon, Miss Dolly. I'll live to bury you all."

"I'm sure I hope so," quavered Aunt Dolly. "But you must be careful. I was so distressed. After all you've done for Elizabeth! How could she be so ungrateful!"

"Stop chattering! You make my head ache."

Aunt Dolly was hurt.

"Well, I'm sure, Mother —"

"Stop it, I say! I'd rather live with a parrot." She moved fretfully against the lace trimmed pillows. "Did you tell them I want to see Elizabeth as soon as she returns?"

"Zeke is waiting in the hall. And Lina is in the kitchen. But hadn't you better wait until morning? A good night's rest —"

"What time is it?" Grandmother interrupted.

Aunt Dolly consulted the gilt clock on the mantle.

"Ten," she reported. "What can be keeping the child so late? Oh dear, it's all just too dreadful!" wailed Aunt Dolly who was enjoying the excitement very much indeed.

"If she isn't here at half past," Grandmother announced, "I shall send Randolph after her . . . Where is he?"

"Pacing up and down in the library. I was really afraid he would have a stroke. He ought to be more careful. At his age —"

"Nonsense!" said Grandmother tartly.

"You'd have us all lying at the point of death if you could do it by talking. Keep quiet or go where I can't hear your chatter."

Aunt Dolly retreated in silence to a chair beside the window. The night was bright with stars and the slim silver crescent of moon. On the rim of the fountain below Hope sat with Lloyd. Aunt Dolly found the view from the window extremely interesting. At times she sniffed the ammonia bottle and passed her hand over her brow. All things considered it had been a momentous evening. And the worst was yet to come! She hoped that her nerves would stand the strain, and parted the curtains for a clearer view of the fountain.

Grandmother Lloyd was deep in thought. The first shock of Elizabeth's defiance had worn away. Her sharp wits were busy with plans and re-adjustments. She could not believe that the child was in love with this Warren boy. Julia and Randolph had hinted at that. But the suggestion was absurd. It was only her strange loyalty to the boy. She had been like that ten years ago and always as stubborn as a mule. They had, perhaps, acted unwisely. Randolph was ridiculous, roaring like a lion. That was no way to manage Elizabeth. They must be more careful in the future. In less than a month she would be safely married. Until then they must be cautious. Grandmother's confidence in her own power, though a little shaken, had by no means deserted her. If anything should happen, there were

ways of bringing the child to reason. She thought complacently of the gilt-edged securities locked in the family vaults.

Then a disturbing memory forced its way into her scheming head. There had been one person upon whom the gilt-edged securities had had no effect. And the child was like her father. She fell to thinking of Phillip. He was the only one of her children who had defied her. Randolph and Dolly and Julia had given her no trouble. Also they had bored her a little. Phillip was her favorite though she had been obliged to carry out her threats when he persisted in marrying Jane Bennett, daughter of an obscure clergyman, as meek as a mouse and without, so far as Grandmother had ever been able to discover, a single redeeming virtue. For years she had been estranged from Phillip. Pride would not permit her to take the first step toward a reconciliation. And Phillip had seemed satisfied with the situation. The fact that his child had been given her name Grandmother had thought to be an attempt to curry favor instigated by his unsuitable wife. She had mourned secretly but had not yielded an inch.

With the war came her opportunity. In the sacred name of duty Grandmother had sent for Phillip's wife and child. The child had been trying but she had reminded the little old lady of her favorite son. Grandmother, like many another tyrant, secretly respected those who dared to defy her

and cherished a lofty contempt for weaker vessels. Phillip had returned from France completely dependent on her. That, by some queer twist, had seemed a matter for congratulation. And the child had grown into a beautiful woman. She was well worth the money that had been spent upon her. Grandmother was not miserly but she expected some return from her investments. This alliance with the Salem Embrees would pay the debt in full.

But what if the child should upset her plans? The thought filled Grandmother with rage. Elizabeth involved with the junk man's protege, the son of a common thief! She forced herself to think of it calmly, to devise a scheme that would bring the child to reason. Her most powerful weapon was the money. But what if, like her father, that should have no effect? The child might be capable of any madness. What, in that remote contingency, could she do?

Grandmother thought long and earnestly. Her shrewd brain beneath the lace cap devised, pondered, rejected. No scheme that she could formulate was satisfactory. And then, with the swiftness of an inspiration, came the perfect scheme. She held it up to the light, examined it for flaws, found it entirely adequate. Peace descended upon her. She did not anticipate trouble. But if it came, she would be prepared. Grandmother left nothing to chance. She should, indeed, have been the general of an army.

"Here she is!" Aunt Dolly exclaimed in a state of great excitement.

"Who?" asked Grandmother calmly.

"Elizabeth. She must have come by the river road and through the back gate. And there is —" Aunt Dolly pressed her face against the screen. "Yes, it's Roger walking to meet her."

"What are they doing now?" asked Grandmother from the depths of the carved walnut bed.

Aunt Dolly, like a faithful aide-de-camp reported the progress of events to her general.

"They're talking to Hope and Lloyd," she announced in a shrill whisper. "Now Hope and Lloyd are walking toward the house. I think he has his arm around her. Do you suppose —"

But Grandmother, just then, was not interested in Hope and Lloyd.

"Watch Elizabeth," she commanded briefly. "What are they doing?"

"Oh dear!" Aunt Dolly's voice was desolate. "They're going to sit under the arbor where I can't see a — No they aren't!" she exclaimed joyfully. "They're sitting on the rim of the fountain. Thank heavens it's a clear night!"

Grandmother shared a little of Aunt Dolly's excitement.

"How close are they sitting?" she asked.

"Rather far apart. Oh dear, do you suppose —"

"I'm not supposing," said the little old lady crisply. "What are they doing now?"

"She's talking to him. But of course I can't hear a word."

Aunt Dolly strained her ears against the screen. There was silence for an interval. Grandmother fumed beneath the silken cover.

"He's pacing back and forth!" Aunt Dolly announced. "What can that mean? Now he's holding out his arms . . . Oh dear, this curtain will blow in the way! . . . She's standing too. And he hasn't kissed her yet. They're talking. Oh-h-h!" She uttered a muffled shriek. "She's handing him something. Do you suppose it can be her ring?"

"Of course not," said Grandmother more to convince herself than to answer Aunt Dolly.

"Now he's kneeling on the grass. Actually kneeling! Did you ever hear of such a thing?" Aunt Dolly's excitement increased. "And he's kissing her hand. It looks like the movies with the fountain behind them and the lawn and—"

"Omit the scenery!" said Grandmother sharply. "I am quite familiar with it . . . What are they doing now?"

"He's still kissing her hand. Isn't that sweet! Or is it? They're walking toward the house. Now they're under the arbor and I can't see a thing." She turned from the window and asked in a tragic voice, "Mother, do you suppose she has broken her engagement?"

"I'll soon find out," said Grandmother grimly. "Go get her at once and don't come back!"

Aunt Dolly scurried out of the room in a flutter of swan's-down and pale blue silk. Grandmother composed herself upon the pillows. She must be calm. Perhaps it would not be a bad idea to weep a little. Phillip had never been able to stand her tears. She drew a lace handkerchief from under the pillows, crumpled it into a convincing ball. All's fair in love and war, she reminded herself and waited for Elizabeth. Grandmother was not seriously alarmed. Had she not the scheme that was perfect and flawless?

❋ II ❋

"You wanted to see me, Grandmother?" Elizabeth entered the room, slim and young and beautiful, wrapped in the embroidered shawl.

Grandmother peered at her through the shadows. There was about the child a soft and luminous glow. Her cheeks were flushed and wee golden tapers flamed in her eyes. Grandmother was reassured. Elizabeth, she thought, had never looked so radiant. She must certainly have made her peace with Roger.

"Come here, my dear," she said kindly.

"I meant to talk to you to-morrow." Elizabeth crossed the room. "I thought you would be too tired to-night . . . May I sit on the bed?"

"Of course." Grandmother's voice was gentle. She felt herself to be as wily as a serpent and as harmless as a dove.

Elizabeth settled on the bed, apple-green ruffles trailing against the heliotrope cover, the embroidered shawl slipping away from her shoulders.

"I'm sorry about to-night . . . Roger said you were ill."

"Nonsense! A touch of indigestion. I never could eat pound cake."

Grandmother looked searchingly at Elizabeth. In the glow of the rose-shaded lamp she was lovelier than ever. The strained expression had vanished. She seemed to be lost in delightful reveries of her own. A tender smile touched her lips. What had happened? Grandmother was puzzled. "Perhaps we were too impatient," she began. Then she paused and her voice lost its kindly tone. "Elizabeth!" she said sharply. "Why aren't you wearing your ring?"

The words seemed to recall Elizabeth from some far lovely land invisible to Grandmother's eyes. She gave a perceptible start and the smile disappeared in the sudden tightening of her lips.

"I gave it to Roger," she said slowly.

"What!" The word exploded like a miniature bomb in the quiet room.

"I'm not going to marry Roger."

"And why not, if I may be permitted to ask?" The sarcasm in Grandmother's voice was entirely wasted.

"Because," Elizabeth said quietly. "I love David. I've fought against it for weeks. But it's

something I can't help. It's stronger than duty or friendship or gratitude."

The flawless scheme tucked away in Grandmother's head was forgotten for the moment. So, also, was the lace handkerchief and her determination to be calm. She hurled at Elizabeth a torrent of angry words. David's father figured largely in the tirade, Jerry and David himself. The wedding plans were bewailed. Elizabeth's ingratitude, her duty to the family were thoroughly aired. Dark prophecies for the future were held before her, poverty, ruin, disgrace. Grandmother omitted nothing. She sat up against the pillows, her eyes snapping beneath the lace-frilled cap, her hands moving in impressive gestures. It was a magnificent performance.

Her fury could not touch Elizabeth. She sat on the side of the bed, remote, detached, wrapped in her own shining dreams. And that added fuel to Grandmother's wrath. The child apparently heard not a word that she said. This was a flouting of royalty not to be tolerated. Her words became more bitter; her prophecies for the future, darker and more hopeless. Elizabeth, for all the attention she paid, might have been on another planet. Grandmother dropped back against the pillows.

"What did Roger say?" she demanded.

"Roger," Elizabeth answered, "always makes the correct gesture. He wished me happiness and kissed my hand."

"Glad enough to get rid of you, I should think," blazed the little old lady.

"Perhaps." Elizabeth smiled a little.

Grandmother changed her tactics.

"How can you treat us so?" she asked with a convincing sob and held the lace handkerchief against her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Grandmother." Elizabeth's voice faltered for the first time. "I know you think I'm ungrateful. But I can't help it. I've always loved David. To-night when I thought he might die, I knew that I could never leave him again. You must have loved somebody once." Her voice was soft and pleading. "Can't you understand?"

"I understand that you are about to ruin your life," said Grandmother sharply. "That I shall not permit."

"How do you know?" Elizabeth's chin lifted. Her flashing eyes signaled a rising storm. "How can you be so sure?"

"Do you question my wisdom?"

Swords clashed in the dim quiet room. The air was filled with invisible sparks.

"You can't arrange everybody's life, Grandmother. I know you've been good to me. But that doesn't give you the right to own me body and soul!"

"It gives me the right to prevent you from making fools of us all."

"You've ruined Lucile's life," Elizabeth

stormed. "You took away Lloyd's wings. But you can't do that to me. If my life is to be wrecked, I shall at least have the satisfaction of doing it myself."

Grandmother unsheathed her most powerful weapon.

"You'll never get a cent of my money," she said grimly.

"I expected you to say that," Elizabeth said coldly. "You can keep your money."

"How will you live?" queried the little old lady.

"David will take care of me. We never will ask you for help."

Elizabeth's courage, her beauty, warm and bright as a flame, won from Grandmother a reluctant sort of admiration. Oh, to be young again and beautiful and in love! She herself had been like that once. For a moment she wavered; but only for a moment. Too long had Grandmother Lloyd wielded a tyrant's power. She would not be conquered by the child, be made ridiculous in the eyes of her reverent subjects. Her will must be supreme. And perhaps it was only a fancy. Elizabeth would get over it. She must.

"Unless you promise never to see that boy again," she continued, "you cannot live here. I'll not be made a laughing stock."

"I expected that too." Elizabeth calmly spiked another gun. "I have made my plans."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I don't think that would interest you, Grandmother."

"You — you'll marry this boy?"

"We have not discussed it. David, you know, is ill."

"Hasn't he asked you to marry him?" This for Grandmother was the last straw.

"I shall ask him," again her lips curved into a smile, "as soon as he is strong enough to stand the shock."

"You're shameless," said the little old lady scornfully.

"Absolutely," Elizabeth agreed. "You see, I happen to love him very much."

Grandmother felt that it was time to produce her flawless scheme. Her eyes, bright and cold as turquoise beads, glittered with anticipated triumph.

"There is one person," she said slowly, "whom you seem to have forgotten. What do you propose to do about your mother?"

A look of fright crept into Elizabeth's eyes. Grandmother observed it and congratulated herself. Ah, her scheme was flawless. She had the upper hand now.

"This is Mother's home, isn't it?" Elizabeth asked.

"Only so long as I choose to keep her."

"You mean," Elizabeth continued, "that Mother must go if I —"

"If," said Grandmother in gloating triumph, "you persist in this madness."

"But," faltered Elizabeth, "Mother would have nowhere to go."

"That," said Grandmother coldly, "is a matter worthy of consideration."

"Grandmother, you couldn't!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "You couldn't do a thing like that!"

"She has no claim on me," said the tyrant in the frilled lace cap.

"Father loved her." The fear had crept into Elizabeth's voice. "For his sake you couldn't refuse to give her a home."

"I have never cared for her. If you go, she can no longer stay here."

"You — you're trying to frighten me."

"I am trying to prevent you from ruining your life."

"Oh no you aren't! You're not thinking of me. You don't care what I do. It's yourself and your precious family! If you loved me at all you would want me to be happy. There's nothing but pride in your heart!"

"Elizabeth!" Grandmother shrank from the fury in Elizabeth's eyes. "How can you?" she wailed.

"But I'm not afraid." She rose from the bed, her body, straight and slim as a lance, armored in the folds of the embroidered shawl. "You are a cruel old woman!" Her amber eyes, dark with rage, blazed at the little old lady in the depths of the walnut bed. "But even you could not do that."

Grandmother rallied her retreating forces.

"You will see," she said grimly. "The day you marry that Warren boy your Mother will leave my home."

"Father said you were cruel. I think he hated you. And I—" she moved proudly toward the door, "shall hate you as long as I live!"

Grandmother had her moment of triumph. But the taste of victory was bitter on her lips. She huddled beneath the heliotrope cover, tiny and old and deserted. Twice she had suffered defeat. Twice she had lost the only persons she had ever cared for in all her arrogant life. But she did not blame herself. Fate was somehow responsible. In that moment of loneliness Grandmother Lloyd still felt that royalty can do no wrong.

❋ III ❋

Roger paced across the guest room rug, hurt and angry and bewildered. The ring he had given Elizabeth, the Embree heirlooms twinkled in a pile on the desk. He tried not to look at them but his eyes returned again and again to the mocking bright little heap. He felt that his gods had been insulted and righteous indignation battled with the hurt in his heart.

How could she have done this thing? He had thought she was queenly and gracious, a woman worthy to grace his fireside and share his life. But she was like all the others, light and fickle and very

lovely. The thought of her beauty tortured him. Never had she been so lovely as in that moment beside the fountain when he knew he must lose her forever. The soft shine of her eyes, the trembling curve of her lips were not for him. But he had been generous. That thought consoled him a little. His dignity had not suffered. He had wished her happiness. And because it seemed the appropriate gesture, he had knelt to kiss her hand.

How, he asked himself miserably, could he have been so mistaken in her? She cared nothing about his work, his desires, his ambitions. The scene in the music room was distressing. The Elizabeth he loved would not have defied her family and disregarded his wishes. But she wasn't the girl he had loved! Damn women anyway! Roger groaned. Another pedestal had toppled. He mourned less for the real Elizabeth than for the image she had shattered.

Weary of pacing, Roger sat down at the desk. Beside the jewels lay a pile of manuscript paper, sheet after sheet covered with his precise writing. It was the first few chapters of "Old Salem," the fruit of years of research. He regarded it grimly, felt that he hated it now. What was the use? His life was ruined. Never again might he read it to Elizabeth, hear her words of praise, see her sitting beside him in the study of the Cambridge house. Roger groaned again. How could she have done this thing?

He determined to destroy the manuscript. Why not? The havoc wrought by a lovely woman might as well be complete. His pride had been wounded, the gods of his ancestors scorned. He would give her his most cherished ambition to trample beneath her dancing feet. The prospect filled him with a gloomy sort of satisfaction. Roger would have made an excellent martyr.

His hands trembled as they lifted the pile of paper. He would burn it in the fireplace. Perhaps the ashes of his hopes scattered across the hearth might wake in her a feeling of remorse. He started to rise from the chair but sank back again unable to resist the anguished joy of reading it again. As he read, the grim angle of his jaw relaxed. The moody expression vanished from his eyes and a burning excitement took its place. He read aloud, hesitatingly at first and then with deep enjoyment. At times he nodded his appreciation of a well-turned phrase. Once or twice he changed a word.

When the last page had been laid on the pile, he unscrewed his fountain pen. Blank paper lay before him and thoughts clamoring to be expressed tapped at the door of his mind. The pen moved steadily across the paper. Roger lost all consciousness of time and surroundings. A second, a third page was covered with precise letters. He rumpled his hair and sometimes he whistled. There was nothing about him to suggest the heartbroken lover. The gods of Salem had brought him peace.

Chapter Ten

❋ I ❋

IN the garden behind her small white house Miss Phoebe Frost was setting out tomato plants. The garden, surrounded by a white-washed fence, was a miracle of intensive farming on the smallest of possible scales. There were plots for vegetables, for flowers and for herbs. Miss Phoebe was a tidy soul. Each small plot was separated from its neighbor by a row of sticks. Later, when the season was at its height, the beans might trail into the pansy bed and the cucumber vines might invade the geraniums. To-day, however, each kept to its allotted space. The effect was rather like a patchwork quilt with the rows of sticks for feather stitching between the green, the red and the variegated blocks.

A narrow path bordered with currant and gooseberry bushes divided the garden in half and at the end against the fence were a cherry, a plum and a flourishing apple tree. Even the roof of the kitchen porch served a useful purpose. It was there that the pumpkins would ripen when the vines had reached the top. The prickly pear tree through which David once had scrambled still spread its branches over the flat tin roof. There were hollyhocks along the fence and patches of mint and

pennyroyal in sheltered places. The fruit on the strawberry plants promised to be ripe before very long. Already the rose vines were starred with blossoms. Miss Phoebe lavished a great deal of care upon the garden. And the care was rewarded. Things always grew for her. It was her proudest boast that she never "ate out of a can."

She wore this morning the inevitable basque with a thread-lace collar and buttons up the front. For gardening purposes the customary white apron was replaced by a capacious one of ticking and a broad brimmed straw hat tied bonnet-wise under chin warded off the slanting rays of sunlight. Miss Phoebe worked briskly. All of her motions were energetic. And her thoughts moved as swiftly as her trowel. She was thinking that this fuss about Elizabeth's wedding things had put her behind with her garden. She decided very firmly that not another stitch would she take until the tomato plants were set out and the pansy bed weeded clean. Libby Randolph might command other folks but Phoebe Frost, the saints be praised, was her own mistress.

Miss Phoebe, too, had come from Virginia. She was the youngest of four daughters of a family that once had occupied the more humble property adjoining "My Lord's Gift," the magnificent estate owned by Libby Randolph's father. Her oldest sister had attended the Richmond Female Seminary with the Libby Randolph and a friendship, of sorts, had existed between the two families. But the for-

tunes of the Frosts had declined and Miss Phoebe was not beautiful. Her sisters married. She taught in a country school and no gallant young squire sought to alter her position.

Accordingly when Libby Randolph, then Mrs. Phillip Delancey Lloyd, had invited her to come up to Winchester and preside over the school house behind "The Poplars," she had willingly consented. When the children had outgrown Miss Phoebe, she had bought, with her tiny income, the house at the edge of town. She lived alone with her cat and canary, her garden and pumpkin vine, an independent scrap of a woman who felt herself "beholden to nobody."

As she set the tomato plants in tidy rows, she thought of Libby Randolph. Miss Phoebe did not bend a knee to royalty. She was often exasperated and sometimes amused at Grandmother Lloyd's regal gestures. She'll get her come uppance one of these days, Miss Phoebe thought. Has the notion she can move people about like checkers across a board. Kin to the Almighty! This wedding now. That was her doings likely. The child seemed pleased enough. But there was a look in her eyes sometimes. If Elizabeth was being forced against her will, come what might, Miss Phoebe wouldn't set another stitch. She scooped out a hole with a violence which suggested that she would like to inter all tyrants therein.

She continued to think of Elizabeth. The

child seemed, somehow, to be on her mind. Nice little thing. Like her father for spunk and independence. And no airs even if she had travelled across the ocean. The look in her eyes wasn't right. Seemed as though something should be done . . . "You'd meddle too, would you, Phoebe Frost!" she scolded herself. "Better tend to your digging and let other folks alone."

Elizabeth so filled her mind that she thought she must be dreaming when she looked up from the tomato plants and saw the child coming around the corner of the house. She blinked rapidly but the vision did not vanish. There was Elizabeth in a slim green frock and a drooping hat, undeniably real, walking toward her between the currant and gooseberry bushes. And she was carrying a suit case! Whatever, in the world?

"Hello, Miss Phoebe," she called across the patchwork garden.

Miss Phoebe's small black shoe button eyes peered at her from under the straw bonnet.

"What are you doing here this time of day?" she asked.

"I've come to stay," Elizabeth answered, "if you'll let me."

The trowel dropped from Miss Phoebe's astonished hand.

"To stay!" she repeated.

"If only you'll let me." Elizabeth set the suit case in the path and sat on it. "I'm not going to

marry Roger," she continued. "And Grandmother is a bit upset."

"I guess likely!"

"So I haven't any home. And I haven't had any breakfast. And I hope you will let me stay."

"No breakfast!" Miss Phoebe abandoned the tomato plants. "It's after ten o'clock. You must be starved!"

"I am. I haven't eaten since I can remember."

"Come along with me." Miss Phoebe stepped gingerly between the cucumber vines and the lettuce plants. "Mind I'm not taking sides," she warned Elizabeth. But I can't let you starve on my hands."

She trotted briskly up the garden path, her full challis skirt switching about her ankles, an angel of mercy with the sharpest tongue and the kindest heart in the world.

The kitchen was cheerful and neat as wax. Miss Phoebe darted about in a frenzy of motion, beating up an omelette for Elizabeth, bringing honey and rolls and milk.

"You'd better tell me everything," she advised. "I can listen while I work."

Elizabeth sitting in a rocker beside the sunny south window told her story to the accompaniment of the egg beater, the lively patter of Miss Phoebe's feet across the kitchen floor.

"I'm not saying you're right," she said when Elizabeth had finished, "and I'm not saying you're wrong. That's something you'll have to decide for yourself."

"I have decided," Elizabeth answered slowly. Her eyes strayed through the window to rest on the cottage next door where David used to live. "Whatever happens, I never will leave him again."

Miss Phoebe was only human.

"How'd *he* take it?" she asked pouring the beaten eggs into the skillet.

"Roger? Oh, well enough. He said he was heartbroken but Hope told me he wrote half the night. He cares more for his books than he ever did for me. I suspect he was somewhat relieved." Her lips curved into a smile. "Roger can't stand scenes."

"Was there a scene?"

"Such a scene!" The smile deepened. "Grandmother fainted, they told me. And Uncle Randolph nearly had a stroke."

"I suppose so." An answering smile hovered about Miss Phoebe's lips. "Has *he* gone?"

"Yes . . . Roger and Hope left on the early train this morning. I shall miss her very much."

"Davie Warren," mused Miss Phoebe. "He was a quiet well-mannered little fellow. Many's the time I've wished them back, after those mill people moved in next door. They keep a goat and the children are worse than young savages . . . Davie was smart, too," she continued. "I've had it like a weight on my conscience that I wasn't more neighborly. 'Twasn't the child's fault what his father did."

"Do you remember his Father, Miss Phoebe?"

"Yes, indeed." Miss Phoebe turned the omelette with a skilful flop. "They came next door when first they were married. Pleasant, nice looking young man, the last one on earth you'd think would go bad. But human nature is deceiving. . . What are you going to do?"

"I have a job," Elizabeth announced.

"You mean to work?"

"I must. I haven't any money and Grandmother locked up my clothes."

"Well for mercy sakes!" exclaimed Miss Phœbe.

"I stopped in the "News" office. Mr. Perry says I can start to-morrow."

"What doing?"

"Oh anything. I can write a little, you know. Poor Mr. Perry was completely dumbfounded. I'm afraid he thinks it's a sort of joke."

"I wouldn't wonder!" A gleam faintly suggestive of amusement crept into Miss Phoebe's eyes. "What will your grandmother say?"

"Plenty." The smile disappeared. Elizabeth raised her chin. "But I don't care. She can keep her money. I'll work until David is well. Maybe afterwards. Who cares? And I want to stay here with you. I'll pay my board and try to keep out of the way."

Miss Phoebe hesitated.

"Your grandmother would think I was taking sides," she said with a worried frown, "But somebody's got to look after you."

"Of course, if you'd rather not, I can board at Miss Mattie Apple's. She'd take me, I think."

"And eat out of cans!" spluttered Miss Phoebe. "Well I guess not!"

"But if you think Grandmother would object."

Miss Phoebe straightened her shoulders.

"I'm beholden to nobody," she said. "This house is my own. I'll do as I see fit."

"Then please see fit to keep me." Elizabeth smiled coaxingly. "I won't be a bother."

"Of course you will," snapped Miss Phoebe. "I never saw a youngster yet that wasn't."

"Then," Elizabeth said plaintively, "I shall go to Miss Mattie's and probably get ptomaine poison from eating out of a can."

"You'll do nothing of the kind! I won't have a sin like that on my conscience." Miss Phoebe set the omelette, a smoking golden fluff, on the table before Elizabeth. "Now eat it before it's as tough as shoe leather. I'll run up stairs and air out the spare room."

❋ II ❋

"Our lucky little gods, David." Elizabeth placed the walnut-shell figures on a table beside his bed.

"Darling. . ." He smiled at her from under the turban of bandages.

"It's all their fault." She drew the rocker close beside him. "I'll bless them as long as I live."

"They cracked me a terrible wallop," David said ruefully. "Smashed in my skull and broke an arm."

"They thought you were stupid. They expected you to run away with me weeks ago."

"I wanted to."

"Honestly?"

"You know I did."

"How can I ever be sure?" She rested her cheek against his hand. "After all, I proposed to you. Do you think I am shameless, David?"

"I think you're . . . a darling."

"Love me?"

"More than anything else in the world."

"Sure?"

"I've been sure for ten years."

"Well, there's some consolation in that." Her lashes brushed the back of his hand. "Happy, David?"

"Happy," he answered. "And scared half to death."

"Why?"

"You're giving up so much for me."

"What?"

"Your family, a brilliant marriage. . . Cambridge."

"The house was a morgue. I should have died."

"And I've so little to give you in return." His eyes clouded thoughtfully.

"So little, David?"

"Only my love."

"That's enough," she said softly.

"You're so young, Beth. . . Is it enough?"

"If you insist on being noble, I shan't stay another minute."

"Try to get away." His fingers gripped her wrist.

"It's no use. You've got me. I shall have to stay no matter how noble you are."

"We won't be rich," David continued thoughtfully. "Not for years and years. Never, perhaps."

"I don't care."

"You'll miss . . . lots of things."

"I'll have you."

"You're a lovely sweet little goose. You haven't a grain of sense."

"It's fun to be a goose."

"I hope you will always think that." His eyes were troubled; his voice was very grave.

"Let's settle this once and for always, David. I like pretty clothes, of course, and the pleasures that money can buy. I'd probably loathe cotton stockings and scratchy things next to my skin. But if it's a question of choosing, I'll take you and the scratches, my dear."

"Darling!" David said gently. "You won't be sorry if I can help it."

"I know that. I'm not afraid . . . Where do you suppose we will live?"

"They may send me to Brazil or California or —"

"The moon," she said gayly. "Who cares?"

"You are a gypsy, aren't you?"

"Guess I am. The grown-up Elizabeth seems to have vanished entirely."

"Suits me. I was afraid of her. I like the gypsy best."

"Because she belongs to you."

"Does she?"

"As long as you want her."

"That's always."

"Forever and ever, my sweet."

"You're very far away," David said. "Get up here."

"I've been waiting for you to invite me." She sat on the bed so that his undamaged arm might circle around her, so that her cheek might rest against his.

"Did you love Roger?" David asked.

"Jealous?" she teased.

"No . . . just wondering."

She shook her head.

"How do you know?"

"I was never lonely without him and never very happy when he was here."

"Did you miss me?"

"I almost died."

"Darling! Sweet little goose! . . . Couldn't anything make you hate me?"

"What a strange question!"

"Couldn't anything?" he persisted gravely.

"If you lied to me," she answered slowly, "or were unfaithful. I couldn't stand that."

"You needn't worry. I've never cared about another girl since the day you climbed Miss Phoebe's pumpkin vine."

"Not one?"

"Not even one . . . I hitched my wagon to you."

"And the star dropped down in your lap."

"It's a miracle." His voice was hushed and reverent. "I'll believe in anything now. Fairies and magic and Santa Claus."

"And our lucky little gods?"

"Bless them! Of course."

"You're a very satisfactory person, David."

"Why?"

"You don't build pedestals. You love me just as I am."

He proceeded to assure her of that. The telling consumed a great deal of time. Then Elizabeth told him about the battle she had fought, about crying in the New York hotel when the orchestra played Hope's song. And David described the loneliness that followed their last night under the willows. They could speak of unhappiness now because it was a thing of the past. The memory

of miserable hours increased their joy in being together, cheek resting against cheek, never to be separated again.

They planned a rosy and quite improbable future. David was to become a brilliant success. Laurel wreaths, which if ever they might be deserved would embarrass him woefully, were to be placed upon his brow. Elizabeth was to be the perfect wife, always sweet tempered, devoted and beautiful. They built a house in California. They planted gardens, graded lawns, installed a swimming pool. They named the children.

Only at infrequent intervals did the thought of Grandmother's threat enter Elizabeth's mind. And then it did not greatly disturb her. Compared to the joy of being with David that seemed a very small matter indeed. She did not tell him about it. That would make it seem real and she did not believe that Grandmother would refuse to give Mother a home. If she did, they would take Mother with them to Brazil or California or the moon. What did it matter? What did anything matter so long as they were together? No fear of the future shadowed her happiness. Nothing could part them now. The lucky little gods were wiser. But they could not warn her for, after all, they were only walnut shells with wire legs and features traced on in ink.

Jerry entered presently, having warned them of his approach by a vigorous rap at the door.

"Would you advise brick or stone, Jerry?" Elizabeth asked.

"What for?"

"The house we are going to build?"

"I don't know as I'd like to answer off hand." Jerry's face was solemn but his eyes twinkled beneath his crochety brows. "That's a question that must be pondered. Better, Davie, me lad? Though, bless you, I don't need to ask?"

"Feeling great," David answered.

"You're gettin' mighty popular, son. There's someone to see you downstairs."

"Who?"

"The girl from the drug store." Jerry looked a bit puzzled and uncertain.

"Amy Phelps? . . . Can't be bothered."

"I'll tell her you ain't allowed to have callers." Jerry winked at Elizabeth and went off downstairs to dispose of the guest.

"That girl must be fond of you, David," Elizabeth said when again they were alone.

"Bunk!" But David flushed. Even his ears were pink.

"I can't understand," Elizabeth teased, "how anyone could be. But some girls have curious taste."

"She's not a bad sort of kid."

"In spite of her liking for you?"

"I helped her out of a scrape one night."

"Tell me about it."

"— Can't." David was very much embarrassed. "I promised."

Elizabeth was, ever so faintly, annoyed.

"All right," she said and there was a hint of frost in her voice.

"You don't mind, Beth?" David asked anxiously.

"Of course not, silly." The feeling vanished, leaving not a trace of itself behind. "I love you, David," she said softly.

"I adore you." His arm tightened around her. Her tawny bright head rested against his shoulder. Amy Phelps was forgotten in the important business of arranging palm trees around the California house.

The girl from the drug store was destined, however, to again claim a small share of Elizabeth's attention. When, very much later, she let herself out through the gate in the crazy fence, there was Amy Phelps walking up and down on the other side of the road.

Chapter Eleven

❋ I ❋

A BRIEF paragraph in the Winchester "News" announced that the marriage of Elizabeth Randolph Lloyd and Roger Endicott Embree had been indefinitely postponed. Brenda Lee, the society editor, attempted to make of it the sensation it merited. But that was difficult. Grandmother Lloyd refused to be interviewed and Brenda had been unable to coax a word from Elizabeth. As a result she was forced to embellish the statement with flowery phrases and intriguing hints ascribed to "Dame Rumor." Even that attempt at sensation was not a success. Elizabeth herself read the proof. She penciled Brenda's effusion until only the bare fact remained. And because she appealed to Sam Perry, that only appeared in the "News."

The statement, brief as it was, created a sensation sufficiently overwhelming to please even the dramatic Brenda. Winchester buzzed with comments. Those who had received no invitation to the royal wedding talked loudest of all. Dates with the dressmaker were cancelled and orders left with the jeweler recalled. The reverend doctor Matthews abandoned his plan for a vacation trip which he had hoped the fee would provide. The interrupted marriage was a town catastrophe.

The Misses Trueworthy hastened to "The Poplars" with consolation and advice. A great many others did likewise. Their curiosity was not entirely satisfied. Grandmother Lloyd would see no one. Uncle Randolph had gone away. Aunt Dolly merely wept and sniffed violet ammonia. Few of the callers thought to inquire for Elizabeth's Mother. She was, of course, only a Lloyd by marriage.

Sally Sherman became a heroine over night. She alone was able to give a possible reason for the disaster. Sally was a born meddler and a gifted busybody. She made innumerable calls. By midnight of the day following the announcement in the "News" the social elect of Winchester knew that Elizabeth had jilted Roger for David Warren. The sidewalk which led past Jerry's humble residence was worn smooth by the feet of the curious . . . Miss Phoebe was beset with callers. An astonishing number of people found an excuse to visit the "News" office.

So for a week the town buzzed. Then, fortunately, a certain Mr. Jones thought to be an upright husband and citizen, eloped with his stenographer. In the new sensation the older one was forgotten. The feet of the curious bore them in another direction. Miss Phoebe no longer was obliged to fasten her shutters and live upstairs. Elizabeth was permitted to walk down Main street unmolested by questions. She was now neither a sensation nor

a personage. Sales ladies did not rush to serve her with their former alacrity. The social elect greeted her coldly. Sally Sherman gave a party and did not invite her. The Trueworthys were frigid. No one dared to incur the royal displeasure by befriending a princess who had wilfully cast aside her crown.

Elizabeth did not mind the snubs. She liked the dirty, cluttered "News" office, thick with smoke, noisy with the clatter of the machines beyond the thin partition. Brenda Lee, the only other woman on the force, had a clean cubby hole downstairs. Brenda had spent six months in New York. She confessed to a temperament which could be distracted by clutter and noise. There were flowers on her desk and a cushion in her chair. Brenda, a yearning, ash-blonde, wooed the muse in appropriate surroundings. It rewarded her with wistful bits of verse, "Lady Moon," "Wishes," "You and I." Sam Perry, the editor, said they were slop but permitted them to be published in "The Poet's Corner" there to be read and wept over by Winchester housewives.

Elizabeth developed no temperament. She worked in the room with the men. Her desk was a battered table; her chair, a splintery ruin. Her dainty slippers rested upon an ancient accumulation of paper and ashes and half smoked cigarettes. The work was not difficult, a regular routine which somehow managed to escape monotony. She read proof, re-wrote articles from other papers, supplied appro-

priate headlines. When the paper went to press at half past one, she was free. And she enjoyed the adventure. It gave her an exhilarating sense of freedom to be working for herself. She liked fat Sam Perry, slangy Walt Smith, fussy Ed Burns, even the artistic Brenda. The printers appreciated her decorative presence. Pete, the press boy, inky from head to foot, was her devoted slave.

Life at Miss Phoebe's was pleasant. Elizabeth became very fond of the peppery little old lady. Grandmother Lloyd made one magnificent excursion to the small white house at the edge of town. Elizabeth was not there and she never learned the details of the interview. Miss Phoebe merely informed her that she had not allowed Libby Randolph to dictate to her in her own house. Elizabeth thought that quite probable. Her fondness for Miss Phoebe was well-flavored with respect.

David recovered, save for the broken arm. Sometimes Miss Phoebe invited him for supper. He charmed her by praising the garden and eating huge quantities of biscuits and jam. Often he weeded the pansy bed and performed other one-handed jobs. Miss Phoebe liked him and that pleased Elizabeth. She would have been entirely happy had it not been for the worry about Mother which lay like a shadow across her path.

Mother came to Miss Phoebe's whenever it was possible. That was not very often. Grandmother forbade it and she, of course, owned all the

cars at "The Poplars." One afternoon Mother walked in. She arrived at Miss Phoebe's white and trembling. They made her lie on the parlour sofa. Miss Phoebe fanned her and Elizabeth bathed her head. Presently she recovered and seemed as well as usual, asking questions about the office, inquiring for the cats and the garden. She had never reproached Elizabeth or complained about Grandmother. Nor did she tell her the outcome of a consultation with the doctor. In all the years of her gentle life Jane Bennett Lloyd had never considered herself. Elizabeth must be happy. That was her only desire.

After the ill-fated pilgrimage Mother did not attempt to walk the distance again. Sometimes just at dusk Elizabeth met her at the boat house behind "The Poplars." Often David went too. Mother liked him first for Elizabeth's sake. It was not long until she liked him for himself. She had never felt at ease with Roger. David's simplicity reassured her. She frequently called him "her boy."

Aunt Dolly, excited by the idea of disobeying Grandmother, came occasionally to Miss Phoebe's but Aunt Julia ignored Elizabeth completely. Uncle Randolph had not returned from a trip to Virginia. His nerves, Aunt Dolly reported, were frightfully shattered. Lucile brought the children. To her, Elizabeth's independence was an amazing and beautiful thing. Uncle James seemed to feel the same way about it. "Proud of you," he mumbled when he

met her one day on the street. And then he looked around to see if anybody was watching. Uncle James had worn the fetters for many years. He could admire independence though he dared not risk it himself.

The effect of Elizabeth's rebellion upon Lloyd was most amazing of all.

"Well, I've done it, Beth," he announced as he walked home from the 'News' office with her one afternoon.

"Done what?"

"Written a letter."

"To Hope?"

"Of course." He swung his cane with a flourish. "But another even more important than that."

"Don't be mysterious, Lloyd. It's too hot."

"I wrote to my major in the army. He's stationed at Pensacola."

"Lloyd!" Elizabeth stopped in the middle of the street. "Are you going to fly?"

"If they'll let me . . . Come on, you'll be run over."

"That's wonderful." They made the sidewalk in safety. "Have you told anybody?"

"Thought I'd wait until it was settled. Gee, I'm as thrilled as a kid!"

"Why didn't you do it long ago?"

"Hadn't the nerve," he said gruffly. "But if you could face the music I guess I can."

"That's the boy!" Elizabeth squeezed his

arm. "You were splendid . . . before you lost your wings."

"I'll get them back if I can. She won't call me useless again."

"Meaning Hope?"

"Little witch!"

"Like her?"

"Some," he said with a smile.

"I'm shouting for you."

"Would you give us your blessing?"

"A hundred of them and something from the Five and Ten."

"That a promise?"

"Word of honor."

"All right. I'll wire her at once." And Lloyd took himself off in a brisk and determined fashion quite different from his former lazy indifference.

So the checkers on Grandmother's board began to skip around in a disturbing manner of their own. Grandmother, more regal, more arrogant than ever, pursued the even tenor of her ways. She missed Elizabeth but of that she gave no sign. She had Aunt Dolly return the wedding gifts. She locked Elizabeth's clothes into the guest room wardrobes and wore the keys on a chain at her side. She never permitted the child's name to be mentioned in her presence and her manner toward Mother was frigidly polite.

Grandmother's confidence in her own power

was supreme. Elizabeth would get enough of that filthy "News" office and living at Phoebe Frost's. She would return to "The Poplars" on Grandmother's own terms. And if all hope of an alliance with the Salem Embrees was gone, there were other worlds to conquer. Elizabeth was beautiful. With the assistance of the gilt-edged securities in the family vault she might marry whom she pleased. Thus Grandmother consoled herself. She entertained no idea of ultimate defeat.

The summer days passed. July was over. David returned to his work at the bridge. It seemed now that it would not be finished before September. Then, when the location of the next job was determined, he and Elizabeth would be married. They made many plans. The plans, enchanting though they were, disturbed Elizabeth. They provided only for the two of them. And there was Mother to be considered. Every day she meant to tell David about Grandmother's threat and every day she postponed the ordeal. He was so happy. She could not bear to cast the shadow across his path.

Elizabeth thought of it constantly but she was unable to find a possible solution. She devised a number of plans and regretfully abandoned them all. Without a little money her hands were tied. Grandmother knew that. She hated her bitterly. But hatred worked no miracles. She was moody and depressed. Sometimes, even with David, she was

strangely silent, apparently unaware of his presence, staring off into space with a troubled expression in her clear amber eyes.

David noticed it. "Is something bothering you, Beth?" he asked as they sat one evening after supper in a hammock hung between the crabapple trees in Jerry's back yard . . .

She nodded her head.

"Are you tired of working? It's so damned hot!"

"No," she answered. "It isn't that."

Icy fingers clutched David's heart.

"Are you sorry, Beth?" There was terror in his voice. "Do you want to go home?"

"No, David . . ."

"Look at me." He tilted her chin. "I can't stand it to have you miserable. Are you sure you love me enough."

"Yes, dear," she answered. "Enough for anything."

David was reassured by the soft clear shine in her eyes.

"Tell me what's bothering you," he said softly. "So long as you love me I can stand anything else."

She told him, then, about Grandmother's threat.

"That does rather complicate things," he said when she had finished.

"I hardly think she would," Elizabeth continued. "But then she might. Grandmother is as hard as flint. Oh, I hate her!"

"That won't help."

"I know," she said drearily. "It's too hot to hate anybody."

"Your mother's mighty sweet. It isn't that." David's voice was thoughtful. "But we won't have much money. We'll have to rough it a bit. That would be tough on her."

"I've thought about it for weeks and I can't find a way out." Elizabeth sighed dolefully.

"Don't fret, sweet. We'll find a way or make one."

"That sounds very well in poetry," she said impatiently. "But how are you going to do it?"

"Lord knows." David's voice lost a little of its confidence. "But we must . . . somehow."

"If only Mother were different!" Elizabeth continued. "She's such a helpless meek little mouse. I could no more desert her than I could a child. She's never had an opinion of her own. Father thought for her and now I must. It isn't fair. But what can I do? I feel a million years older than Mother will ever be."

"I know . . . I used to feel that way about my mother. She was always a child."

"I don't remember her. Tell me about her, David."

Hoping to divert her, David talked about the shabby gray house next to Miss Phoebe's where he and his mother had lived. He told her about the games she had played, the pathetic little devices she had used in an attempt to shield him from hurts.

"I knew they were only games," he said. "Mother saw the frilled paper petticoats she made for her flowers. I knew there were ugly tin cans beneath. She pretended that my father was a wonderful sort of person. I knew he was a thief."

"She was brave, David."

"I can appreciate that now. It used to make me furious. I hated my father and I thought she loved him better than she did me. Her life was a series of games." David smiled. "There was the Buz-buz Dragon."

"What was that?"

"Her sewing machine. She made dresses for the garment factory. And she pretended that the machine was a dragon always howling for food. An evil spell had been laid upon her. She was doomed to feed the dragon until she was rescued by a shining young knight. That was to be me grown up." His voice faltered, his eyes rested upon the jewel-weed against the fence. "She died before I could rescue her."

"No wonder you knew how to pretend."

"I suppose I learned it from her. But with this difference. I knew they were only games."

"She must have been a nice person."

"She was," David said softly.

"Have you a picture of her?"

"An old one."

"Get it, please."

David started off toward the house, grateful

because Elizabeth seemed for a time to have forgotten the shadow that threatened their happiness. His heart was heavy. "Snobs!" he muttered and shied a pebble across the fence.

Elizabeth swung the hammock slowly to and fro. The sun had set behind the chimneys of the tumbling stone house. Soon it would be cooler. The heat in the office had been unbearable. At "The Poplars" it was dim and pleasant. They would be sitting on the back veranda behind the screen of wisteria vines. There would be a breeze from the river. Lina would make lemonade with cherries and sprigs of mint and ice tinkling against the frosted glass. Or she might be at Marblehead now, sailing across the harbor with the spray and the wind in her face. Neither picture tempted her. She belonged to David. She never would leave him again . . . "Fish gotta swim; birds gotta fly," she sang to the accompaniment of the creaking hammock chains. "I gotta love one man 'til I die". . . You can't have everything," she told herself . . . David . . .

He returned presently with a small chest.

"This is my only legacy," he said as he placed it in her lap.

The chest was made of polished wood that smelled like spices, exquisitely carved and inlaid with bits of shell.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"My father made it. They sent it from South

America with the letter that told us he had died. That was three years after he went away. I was four or five. A beefsteak would have been more acceptable," he added bitterly. "I've often wondered what he did with the money."

Elizabeth raised the lid. The chest was lined with fluted silk, worn and splitting at the folds. It contained a strange assortment of objects.

"This was father's watch." David snapped open the heavy case and showed Elizabeth a frail pretty face framed in a fluff of golden hair. "That's Mother," he said and the bitterness had left his voice.

"She's sweet. Your eyes are like hers." Elizabeth glanced at the picture opposite. "Is this you, Davie Warren?"

"Yes." He smiled. "It's a satisfaction to know that I was beautiful once."

"You were beautiful." She admired the round baby face. "What a very magnificent curl!"

"Isn't it," he agreed. "Too bad I had to grow up."

"You're beautiful now."

"My nose is crooked."

"It's a handsome nose." The tip of her finger caressed the doubtful feature.

"Silly!"

"Darling . . ."

Unhappiness forgotten, together they examined the contents of the chest.

"Are these my letters?" she asked.

"The ones you wrote when you went out west to live."

"What terrible scrawls! And here I am on Jingle."

"That's a queer name for a pony."

"Her full name was Jingle Bells because she came at Christmas time . . . What on earth is this?"

"A pink sugar rose . . . Don't you remember?"

"From my birthday cake!" Elizabeth smiled. "They wouldn't let me invite you so I brought you a slice the next day."

"The one with the ring in it, too. See . . . Here it is."

"David," Elizabeth said solemnly. "That was an omen. I shall wear it for an engagement ring."

"You can't get it on," he said. "Remember you're grown-up now."

She discovered that he was right and placed the tarnished circlet in the chest.

"Those clippings," he indicated a yellowed roll girdled with a rubber band, "are all about you."

"You were a sentimental young man," she teased.

"That was the only way I could keep track of you. Thanks to the Winchester 'News,' I knew when you went to college, where you spent your vacations and the ship that took you abroad."

"Thanks to Grandmother, you mean. She

probably kept them informed . . . Did you care as much as that, David, even then?"

"Always," he answered. "And I was glad the 'News' considered you an important person."

"They don't now . . . Life's so queer!"

"Fantastic and crazy — and wonderful sometimes," he said with his arm around her and his cheek against her hair.

"Yes," she admitted. "It has its moments . . . Davie, what's this?"

"A tintype of my mother and father taken on their honeymoon."

Elizabeth opened the pink paper folder, looked at the laughing young man and the pretty girl in leg o' mutton sleeves and a sailor hat. "Aren't they funny and sweet!"

"Mother came to Winchester to teach in the primary school," David explained. "Father worked in the bank. They boarded at old Mrs. Apple's. One day they drove over to West Grove and were married. Neither of them had any close relatives. Mother always regretted the sailor hat. I meant sometime to buy her a wedding veil and a cake three feet high."

"Funny! . . . You look a little like your father."

"Mother said that. I used to hate it."

"What's this written on the back?" . . . "When you and I were young, Maggie," she read out loud.

"Father wrote that for a joke, I suppose. Her name was Margaret."

He went on to talk about that long-ago honeymoon, recalling incidents told him by his mother. Elizabeth did not hear him. She was gazing intently at the words written on the folder of the faded tintype.

"You're sure your father wrote this?" she interrupted him to ask.

"Yes . . . why?"

"Nothing," she answered. But there was a note of excitement in her voice, a sudden pink flush in her cheeks. She examined the words carefully . . . . "When you and I were young, Maggie" . . . They were written with swoops and flourishes. There were curly tails on the "y"s!

❋ II ❋

"Wait here, David," Elizabeth said.

"Where are you going?"

"I want to look for something."

"Don't stay too long." He looked up at the sky. "The stars are gone. It's going to storm."

"Back in a minute."

She opened the gate and crept softly into the garden. It was very dark. She trusted to that for protection. In her pocket was Jerry's flashlight. She was determined to re-visit the school house, to secure a scrap of the letter she had discovered weeks ago among the ashes in the stove.

The writing was the same. She was sure of that. Why should David's father have written to Uncle Randolph? She recalled the scene in the library when she had showed Uncle Randolph the scrap of envelope bearing the foreign stamp. A look almost of terror had flashed into his eyes. What could it mean? She had not told David. There was, after all, nothing to tell. But the similarity of the writing could not be mere coincidence. What could Uncle Randolph know about David's father? She resolved to find out.

Elizabeth's heart beat frantically. She crept forward in the shadow of the lilac bushes fearing that Lina or Zeke might hear her steps on the gravel path. There was a light in the cottage. The window was open. Dolorous sounds wailed through the air. She ventured a glance inside the cottage. The colored preacher, a solemn visaged gentleman in rusty black, was struggling with the lost sheep. Camp-meeting time was at hand. Lina was preparing to seek the light.

"Fling off yo' bondage, sistah," urged the dolorous voice. "Leggo de debbil's coat tails."

"Go down Moses!" groaned Lina rocking her huge body to and fro. "Ah's a mis'able sinnah, bless Gawd!"

Elizabeth was relieved. Lina "Wrastlin' wid sin" was entirely absorbed. Nothing short of a hurricane could have attracted her attention. Breathing a little easier, Elizabeth moved on toward the

school house. A low sound of thunder rumbled through the heavy air. She must hurry. If only the school house door was unlocked!

It was. Elizabeth snapped on the flashlight, followed its winking eye toward the stove. Then her perplexity increased and little shivers chased up and down her spine. The stove had been carefully cleaned. Not even a dusting of ashes remained!

Chapter Twelve

❋ I ❋

RANDOLPH FAIRFAX LLOYD, candidate for Congress, settled back in his office chair and reached for a fragrant cigar. A benign smile lingered upon his ruddy countenance. In spite of the heat, Uncle Randolph had experienced a gratifying day. On the wall behind his chair hung a poster bearing his latest photograph and a dignified request for votes. He was not obliged to twirl the chair in order to admire this masterpiece of the printer's art. A similar poster hung directly opposite the massive mahogany desk and a third occupied the narrow space between the windows. Uncle Randolph's eyes strayed from one to the other, found them pleasing and acceptable.

He had other reasons for self-congratulation. A sheaf of letters on the desk contained the promised support of certain influential gentlemen. The telegram beneath the bronze paper weight assured him of certain election. Besides that, the address which he was to deliver at West Grove and neighboring towns was completed. His secretary, Miss Spence, was typing it in the outer office beyond. The clatter of her machine mingled with the street noises eddying through the open window to form an

agreeable accompaniment to dreams of future glory. In Uncle Randolph's fancy, the noise increased to a thundering roar. He pictured himself bowing from a flag-draped automobile which moved slowly through cheering throngs. The fancy pleased him. He relaxed in the easy chair and whistled a few bars of "Little Annie Rooney," proof enough that so far as Uncle Randolph personally was concerned, God was in his heaven and all was right with the world.

His eyes wandered from the poster to rest upon a yellow rose in a slender vase on the desk. A bud, obviously from the same bush, adorned the lapel of his linen coat. Kate Trueworthy had brought them when she stopped in that afternoon to consult him about some investments. Emilie and Flora had also come singly upon a similar mission. Uncle Randolph found their helplessness in business affairs very touching indeed. They needed, he thought, a man in the family. The Trueworthy fortune was considerable. Properly managed it would yield a handsome income. He pondered the advisability of marrying one of the sisters. Old Judge Trueworthy, recently deceased, had a great deal of influence throughout the state. Such an alliance would, undoubtedly further his political aspirations. It seemed a judicious course to pursue.

But which one? Uncle Randolph devoted himself to a careful consideration of the question. They had inherited equally. Other qualities, therefore, must determine the selection. He discarded Flora,

the middle sister, at once. She was the plainest of the three and already a little deaf. Kate, the youngest, had a few years to her credit. Also the yellow roses and a pretty feeling for sentiment. He sniffed the bud in his coat lapel and thought that surely it would be Kate. Then he remembered Emilie, the eldest. She held as a part of her inheritance the Trueworthy home, a dignified mansion on Chestnut street, second only to "The Poplars" in magnificence.

The thought was worthy of consideration. Uncle Randolph realized that his mother was mistress of "The Poplars." He had no real authority there nor any resources save what he earned or received from her. In time, of course — But his mother gave every indication of living to a ripe old age. At the Trueworthy mansion he would be lord and master. Emilie was the sort of woman he admired, sweet and gentle with no will of her own. She would be content to be guided by him. The thought of two devoted and well-financed sisters-in-law was not altogether distasteful. Kate and the yellow roses were forthwith discarded. He decided to confer the great honor upon Emilie, the eldest.

No fear of refusal entered Uncle Randolph's plans. Was he not in the prime of life, just past fifty, a fine figure of a man and almost certain to be enrolled among the legislative great? A refusal was unthinkable. It touched him to reflect upon the pleasure in store for Emilie. Dear little woman!

How proud she would be . . . "My husband, Congressman Lloyd, the Winchester Lloyds, you know . . . He determined to call upon her that evening. The soōner, the better, of course. Uncle Randolph whistled the concluding bars of "Little Annie Rooney" and fondled the cigar. But he did not light it. As he was searching through his pockets for a match, his attention was diverted by a clear, determined young voice.

"May I speak to you, Uncle Randolph?"

He glanced up. Elizabeth stood in the doorway. The benign smile vanished. "Come in," he said gruffly, "and close the door behind you."

She obeyed instructions, walked across the thick soft rug to a chair beside the desk.

"There's something I want to ask you, Uncle Randolph." She seated herself quietly, folded her hands in her lap.

"You want money, I suppose." Uncle Randolph scowled very fiercely. "I shall not encourage this outrage. You've made your bed. Now lie in it." Having delivered himself of this noble sentiment, he coughed loudly and fidgeted with the letters upon the desk.

"If I were starving," Elizabeth said with a calmness more impressive than rage, "do you think I would ask you for help?"

"You'll be glad to, sometime," Uncle Randolph predicted. Then he added with apparent irrelevancy. "You always were as stubborn as a mule."

"I haven't a monopoly on that. There seem to be a number of mules in our family."

"If you have come here to abuse your relatives, I shall ask you to excuse me." The ruddy hue of Uncle Randolph's complexion deepened to dull crimson. "You have disgraced us sufficiently as it is."

"I didn't come for that, Uncle Randolph," Elizabeth said quietly. "You introduced the subject of mules. I came to ask you what you know about David's father."

The dull crimson deepened, in turn, to purple.

"What's that? What do I know?" Uncle Randolph blustered. "Nothing — nothing at all."

"You used to know him very well," Elizabeth's clear amber eyes were unwaveringly fixed upon his face. "You worked in the bank when he was there. You went hunting and fishing with him."

"The boy is a liar!" growled Uncle Randolph.

"David did not tell me," Elizabeth continued evenly. "He scarcely remembers his father."

"Then how do you know?"

"I've looked through the old files of the 'News.' You must have been very good friends."

"We were, after a fashion. But what of it?" Uncle Randolph demanded.

"And I'm led to believe that Grandmother did not approve. His name was not included in the list of guests at any social affair given at 'The Poplars.'"

"Well," said Uncle Randolph choosing his words carefully, "Dan wasn't in our class even before the trouble at the bank. No family to speak of but a likeable chap. Just what is the object of all this?" he asked irritably.

Elizabeth ignored the question.

"You knew," she continued, "that Dan Warren was in South America when the police were trying to find him. You knew that and you kept quiet about it."

"It's a lie!" roared Uncle Randolph.

"If you're going to shout," Elizabeth said quietly, "it wasn't much use to close the door. Miss Spence will hear anyway."

"That isn't true," Uncle Randolph repeated in a less violent voice.

"But I know, Uncle Randolph. You see, I've discovered that he wrote you the letter I found in the school house stove."

"What makes you think that?" Uncle Randolph did not look at her. His fingers toyed nervously with the bronze paper weight.

"I've seen his writing. I could swear it is the same though when I went back to the school house, the scraps had been destroyed."

Uncle Randolph's bluster became more convincing. He seemed to remember something which had, for the moment, slipped his mind.

"Maybe," he said. "Dan and I used to hunt and fish together. He might have written me a let-

ter about something or other. A duck hunt or a horse race. Yes . . . maybe, that's right."

"The letter was written in 1905," Elizabeth continued. "The affair at the bank occurred in 1904. The envelope had a foreign stamp. You must have known where he was at that time."

"What if I did?" Uncle Randolph tilted back in the chair. "Dan was a decent sort. I wasn't pledged to tell where he was."

"No," Elizabeth agreed. "But Grandfather was president of the bank. I should think you would have felt it a duty."

"Now, my dear," Uncle Randolph's manner was almost affable. "Women don't understand things like that. The loyalty of one man for another. I wasn't obliged to set the police on his trail."

"But," Elizabeth repeated, "I should think you would have felt it a duty. Unless —"

"Unless what?" The question sped like an arrow across the desk.

"Unless you were in some way involved."

"So that's it!" Uncle Randolph jerked the chair forward. "You'd like to find a family skeleton, eh? Well let me tell you, young lady, you're barking up the wrong tree."

"I must fight," Elizabeth said slowly, "with any weapon I can find. It might," she glanced at the poster against the wall, "be a little inconvenient to find a skeleton now."

The cords in Uncle Randolph's neck swelled.

He made a visible effort to control his rage. "I can't believe it," he muttered. "The family name, the ancient and honorable pride of the Lloyds' means nothing to you. You would betray us all for a young upstart whose father was — " He would have liked to continue but the words choked in his throat.

"That's an old story, Uncle Randolph. I've heard it many times before. But you are wrong. The family name means a great deal to me because it was my father's. I hate all this. Can't we settle it? I want you to help me, Uncle Randolph."

"I help you? Never!" His clenched fist smote the desk a terrific blow. "I'd rather see you dead then married to that boy."

"Don't be dramatic," Elizabeth said wearily. "It's too hot. I'm tired of threats and gestures. I've thought of a plan for Mother. If you'll get Grandmother to agree, I'll forget the scraps of paper I found in the stove."

"Blackmail, eh?"

"It's ridiculous, isn't it? Sounds like a paper-backed novel." Elizabeth laughed hysterically. "But you force me. Yes, blackmail, if you like. That isn't a pretty word. For the sake of this family you shout so much about, won't you help me, Uncle Randolph?"

"Never!" he repeated.

Elizabeth rose from the chair.

"Then I shall be obliged to investigate."

"It won't do you any good. Not a soul in the world would believe you."

"Perhaps not." Her chin lifted proudly. "But I'll find out, if I can."

"Of all the incredible fancies!" Uncle Randolph resumed his blustering manner. "I think you must be crazy. Don't ever disturb me with such notions again."

"I won't, Uncle Randolph." Elizabeth moved toward the door. "Not until I am sure." She paused for a moment with her hand on the knob. "Please believe that I am sorry. I wouldn't do it, if there was any other way."

Uncle Randolph ignored her pleading eyes, the trembling droop of her lips.

"This," he said grimly, "is something I shall not easily forget."

"Nor I, Uncle Randolph. I shall be sorry as long as I live. Won't you ask Grandmother to do what I shall suggest?"

"Never!" he thundered.

"Then I shall have to fight." She straightened her slim shoulders, opened the door and closed it quietly behind her.

Alone in the office Uncle Randolph sought the solace of the cigar. Lighting it was difficult. His fingers trembled so that twice he dropped the match.

❋ II ❋

Elizabeth walked between the double line of poplars and up the wide front steps. With visible effort she lifted the knocker, let it fall with a brassy

clang. The echo died away and presently she heard footsteps inside, Zeke's measured shuffle across the polished floor.

"Good evening, Zeke," she said when he had opened the door.

He blinked at her through the shadows.

"'Evenin', Miss Libby," he said. "Where you been out so late?"

"It's Elizabeth, Zeke."

"So 'tis, honey. Things get sort ob mixed up in mah haid." The old man stiffened. He seemed suddenly to remember that Miss Libby for some reason or other was displeased with the child. His manner became rigidly formal. "Please to step inside, Miss, whilst Ah see if de ladies am at home."

"Where's Mother?" Elizabeth entered the familiar hall.

"Miss Jane been confined to huh room."

"Is she ill?"

"Po'ly, thank you, Miss. She pears to hab a misery in huh side."

"And Uncle Randolph?"

"He ain't here."

"I'd like to see Grandmother."

"Please to take a seat whilst Ah inquiah if dat am convenient."

The old man, dignity in every line of his body, shuffled off down the hall. Elizabeth moved restlessly back and forth from the door to the stairway. She dreaded the interview with Grandmother. It

seemed improbable that the arrogant old lady would agree to her plan for Mother. She was tired, so tired of scenes and conflict. But there was nothing else to do. Elizabeth sighed wearily. The thought of David waiting for her in the shadow of the arched gateway reassured her. She could do this for David, for them both. She must. Tears gathered on her lashes. She winked them away and hummed to keep up her courage. It was so silly, she thought, all this useless pride. She wanted so little. Only the right to be happy in her own way. David . . . Her chin lifted. She could fight for him.

Zeke returned presently.

"Miss Libby axe you please to step out on de back po'ch," he announced with a dignified bow.

Grandmother sat alone on the back veranda behind the screen of wisteria vines.

"Good evening, Elizabeth," she said affably.

"May I talk to you for a little while, Grandmother?"

"Of course. Sit here." She indicated a willow rocker beside her chair.

"I was afraid you might not want to see me."

"Why not? This is your home. You," Grandmother stressed the pronoun, "are always welcome."

"Thank you."

Silence fell upon them, a deep and expectant quiet broken only by the creak of the rockers, the hum of insects in the wisteria vines. It was peaceful

on the back veranda. Shadows trooped about them. A breeze from the river stirred Grandmother's flounces of summer silk, cooled Elizabeth's flushed cheeks. Grandmother had seemed affable. Hope whispered again in her heart.

"Are you quite well, Elizabeth?" Grandmother asked presently.

"Yes, thank you."

"It has been unusually warm. Would you like something cool to drink?"

"No thank you . . . It is pleasant here."

"I dare say the 'News' office is warm."

"Stifling."

"It isn't necessary, you know."

"Yes Grandmother . . . I know."

The shrewd little old lady thought it wise to change the subject.

"What do you hear from Hope?" she asked casually.

"She is at Marblehead."

"And — Roger?"

"Have you heard from him?" The shadows could not completely hide the gleam of interest in Grandmother's bright blue eyes.

"Not directly." Elizabeth's voice indicated no great interest in Roger. "He's writing his book. It is to be published this fall."

"Very interesting," observed Grandmother and fluttered a spangled fan. "Is he . . . well?"

"Apparently." The vague little ghost of a

smile quirked the corners of Elizabeth's mouth. "Hope says his appetite is normal."

"That is gratifying," said the little old lady serenely.

Silence again. Elizabeth rocked thoughtfully. The tiny sequins on Grandmother's fan sparkled through the shadows. Down at the cottage Lina was singing . . . "Swing low, sweet chariot" . . .

"How is Mother?" Elizabeth asked presently.

"She feels the heat. Yesterday we were obliged to send for the doctor."

"Is she ill?"

"Her heart is not strong. The doctor has warned her to be careful."

"But is it serious?" Elizabeth asked in quick alarm.

"Not if she receives the proper care," Grandmother said slowly.

"I came to talk to you about her."

"Yes?"

"Did you really mean that you wouldn't give Mother a home if —"

"I thought I made myself clear." Grandmother's voice was frosty. "The day you marry that boy, your Mother leaves my home."

"You haven't — you wouldn't change your mind?"

"Under no consideration."

"But we can't take her with us, David and I. She couldn't stand roughing it."

"I am aware of that."

"Will you listen, Grandmother?" Elizabeth asked. "I have a plan for Mother."

"If you like," said Grandmother as though the matter was of small concern to her.

"This is it." Elizabeth drew a long desperate breath. "I should like to buy the Hopewell house for her. She loved it there and she has a cousin in Maine who would be glad to live with her. It's a charming place, Grandmother. There's a garden and a lazy little river. The house is large. They might rent some of the rooms to the college girls. That would keep her from being lonely. She mothered dozens of them when we lived there before. And this cousin is a capable person. She would take care of Mother."

"And how?" asked Grandmother cooly, "do you propose to finance this scheme?"

"Won't you do that?"

"I!"

"It wouldn't cost a great deal of money to buy the house and provide her with a small income. Mother is not extravagant."

"You propose that I do this?" Grandmother asked incredulously.

"Why not? It would cost less to buy the house than what you planned to spend on my wedding."

"That is an entirely different matter."

"Less than the pearls or the chest of silver."

"The idea is preposterous!"

"You might do it," Elizabeth pled softly, "for Father's sake, even if you don't care about us."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," Grandmother said crisply. "If you persist in this madness, neither you or your mother will ever receive a penny from me."

"But Grandmother—"

"I prefer not to discuss the matter."

"You must . . . Please, Grandmother. It means so much to me. I'm not asking for anything for myself. David and I don't want your money. But someone must take care of Mother."

"I'm willing to do that."

"On your own terms."

"Precisely."

"Grandmother," Elizabeth's voice trembled, "don't you care at all about my happiness?"

"A very great deal, my dear." Grandmother knew that the victory was hers, that she could afford to be generous. "That is why I force myself to be firm. I cannot allow you to ruin your life. Give up this foolishness and I'll do anything in the world for you."

"But you don't know David," Elizabeth said hotly.

"Quite as well as I care to know him."

"If you'd give him, give us a fair chance!" Elizabeth's expressive hands were clasped imploringly. "I'll promise not to marry him for as long as you say. Won't you let him come here and show you what a splendid person he is?"

"I shall never receive Daniel Warren's son into my home." The words dropped like icicles from Grandmother's rigid lips.

"Grandmother . . . please."

"It is useless to ask me. I shall never change my mind."

"Very well," Elizabeth said in a cool determined voice. "I have given you the opportunity and you have refused."

"I have indeed."

"Then you can hardly expect me to be influenced by any consideration for you." Her eyes blazed through the shadows. She held her head very high. "Whatever happens you will have only yourself to blame."

She left the veranda abruptly, ran through the house and up the front stairs.

Grandmother smiled triumphantly above the spangled fan. Elizabeth's last words meant nothing to her. Uncle Randolph might have explained. But Uncle Randolph was not there. He was, at that exact moment, conferring a great honor upon the mistress of the Trueworthy mansion on Chestnut street.

❋ III ❋

Mother was asleep. Elizabeth snapped on the shaded lamp beside the bed, gazed down at her through a blur of tears. How thin she looked and

tired and worn! Her face framed in a loosened mass of soft dark hair was as white as the pillow case. There were violet shadows beneath her eyes, traces of tears on her cheeks. The hand lying against the counterpane was as transparent as porcelain traced with delicate blue veins. In sleep Mother was off her guard. Elizabeth saw clearly that she was ill and unhappy.

A sudden rush of tenderness filled her heart. It was not Mother's fault and yet she had suffered more than anyone else. Elizabeth knew very well the system of polite torture which Grandmother had employed. Mother was sensitive, so patient and unselfish. She had never complained. Elizabeth reproached herself bitterly. It had been cruel to leave her here alone. Mother had no one else in all the world to love and protect her. What, she asked herself desperately, was to be done?

Father's photograph stood in the circle of amber light. If only he had not left them! She looked at the steady eyes beneath the visor of the military cap. Father would have liked David. They might all have been happy together. But Father had followed the trail over into the sunset. She was left to solve the problem alone. Elizabeth fancied that the eyes in the photograph gazed at her reproachfully. Father loved Mother . . . "Take care of her, Betsy. You're a better soldier than she" . . . She heard Father's voice repeating the words, felt his hand on her head, saw his eyes, tender, loving,

shadowed with pain. She could not fail Father. Even at the price of her own happiness she must be faithful to that trust.

A folded newspaper lay beside the photograph. It was the "Want Ad" section of a city edition. One of the advertisements was marked with a penciled circle. She read it idly. A gentleman desired a housekeeper. She wondered, for a moment, who had traced the circle. Then she understood. Mother was looking for a job. She knew then she alone was the shadow across Elizabeth's path. Mother, timid, helpless not very well, proposed to keep house for a strange gentleman so that Elizabeth might be happy! No wonder there was reproach in Father's eyes. Mother working . . .

She knew that, for the time at least, she was beaten. It wasn't fair. But there was nothing else to be done. She must return to "The Poplars" and take care of Mother. David, happiness, their life together, all of that must wait. There was nothing else to be done. She dropped down on the floor beside the bed, buried her face in the counterpane and sobbed.

Chapter Thirteen

I

ELIZABETH'S return to "The Poplars" created far less excitement than had her departure two months before. She arrived one evening just at dinner time, carrying her suit case and a bouquet for Mother from Miss Phoebe's patchwork garden. Zeke opened the door. She left her suit case and her hat in the hall, followed him into the dining room where the family was assembled.

"I have come home," she announced pausing in the doorway.

The room, mellow with the fading sunset, was very quiet. Rinthy, serving the fruit cup, stood perfectly still. Mother glanced up with a startled question in her eyes. Uncle Randolph gazed out through the window, his handsome features a dull brick-red. Aunt Dolly fluttered and seemed about to speak. Grandmother silenced her with a gesture.

"Arrange another place, Rinthy," she said calmly and smiled at Elizabeth across the centerpiece of fern and roses. "We are glad to see you, my dear."

Dinner progressed peacefully from fruit cup to dessert. There was nothing in the atmosphere to indicate that a hope had been abandoned and a vic-

tory won. Grandmother talked entertainingly upon a variety of subjects. Elizabeth answered direct questions but was, for the most part, silent. Aunt Dolly's chatter filled the pauses. Uncle Randolph was preoccupied. He ate silently and devoted the interval between courses to tracing patterns on the cloth. Once or twice he glanced at Elizabeth and quickly averted his eyes. His preoccupation caused no remark. Uncle Randolph was a busy man these days. He had important matters upon his mind.

After dinner Grandmother led Elizabeth into the library.

"You are home to stay?" she asked.

"For the present."

"What are your plans?"

"I have none."

"You've given up your — position?"

"No. I shall continue to work at the 'News' office."

"That isn't necessary," Grandmother said sharply. "You will receive your former allowance."

"I must have something to do." Elizabeth's lips set in a determined line.

Grandmother did not press the matter. She had won a victory and could afford to be generous. The child, she thought, would tire of it after a while.

"Very well." She unfastened the chain at her side. "Here are the keys to the guest room wardrobes. You will find your clothes in them."

"Thank you, Grandmother."

Elizabeth did not use the keys. She continued to wear the simple linen dresses Miss Phoebe had made. She continued to work at the office, walking in town every morning and out again in the afternoon. Grandmother offered to send her in the car. Elizabeth refused. She was polite to the arrogant little old lady but she would accept no favors.

Mother improved. A faint tinge of pink crept into her cheeks and the pain disturbed her less frequently. Elizabeth devoted herself to Mother's comfort. She was gentle with her and cheerful and gay.

"We'll stay here until you are quite well," she said as they sat together one afternoon on the shaded back veranda. "Not a minute longer than that."

"I hate to be a burden." Mother's eyes filled with tears. "I'll do anything to make you happy."

"I know . . ." Elizabeth recalled the newspaper gentleman who desired a housekeeper and her voice was very gentle. "The one thing you can do is get yourself healthy and fat."

"Then what?"

"We'll run away. You and David and I." She made it sound enchanting. Mother's eyes brightened a little.

"Where?"

"To Brazil or California or the moon," Elizabeth answered gayly.

"You won't want me poking along."

"We'll need you. Who would we have to make us wear rubbers when it rains?"

"I'm just a bother."

"You're a darling meek little mouse! How would you like to live in the moon?"

Elizabeth talked a great deal of nonsense and was rewarded by Mother's quiet pleasure. She did indeed seem better. Elizabeth's presence was a tonic. Grandmother, secure in her victory, was more considerate. Mother gained a little. The hollows in her cheeks filled out. Elizabeth was encouraged. She consulted the doctor.

"Mother is better, isn't she, Doctor Bob?"

Gruff, kindly old Doctor Winthrop, the family physician for many years, pulled his white mustache.

"Well, yes," he said guardedly.

"Would it be safe to take her away any time soon?"

"Depends on conditions." Doctor Bob, friend of her childhood, drew his bushy eyebrows together. "Where are you going?"

Elizabeth, sure of his sympathy, told him the story. He frowned and shook his head.

"That won't do," he said gruffly. "Your mother must have the best of care."

"I don't think she's happy here, Doctor Bob."

"No," he said bluntly. "I don't think she is. But you can't drag her around to construction camps. She must have quiet and pleasant surroundings."

"I wish she might go back to Hopewell."

Elizabeth told him about the rambling old house, the tangled garden and the lazy little river. She told him also about the capable cousin in Maine.

"That's a good idea," the kindly old doctor agreed. "I'll let you take her there."

"I'm afraid it is impossible." Elizabeth sighed. "It seems to be only a dream."

Doctor Winthrop blew his nose very loudly and then said with added gruffness.

"You're not to drag your mother all over the country. Her heart wouldn't stand it."

"Is it serious?" Elizabeth asked anxiously.

"Not necessarily. But you can't take chances."

That evening the shadow seemed very dark.

"They've beaten us, David," Elizabeth said wearily.

"Not yet!" He drove the canoe forward with a determined stroke.

"But what can we do?"

"Lord knows! But there must be a way."

"I'm so tired." She trailed her hand through the water, watched the drops fall like jewels from her fingers.

"If we could just drift along like this forever."

"I'm helpless, Beth," he said bitterly. "Our lucky little gods have left us flat."

The tone of his voice, the disconsolate droop of his sturdy shoulders aroused her to instant ten-

derness. She forgot her own fears in the necessity for comforting him.

"Of course they haven't," she said brightly. "There is, there must be a way."

"All I've ever done is bring you unhappiness." David's voice was desperate. "It's — I'm not worth it, Beth."

"David," she accused. "You're being noble again."

"That's the truth." The canoe drifted into the shadow of the willows. "Even when we were kids. You were always being punished on account of me."

"Anchor this barge," Elizabeth directed. "There's something I must do."

David drove the paddle into the bank, made the tiny craft fast.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Come here. I'm going to scold you."

He settled beside her against the narrow back rest, folded her close in his arms.

"You must never talk that way, Davie Warren." Her hand caressed his cheek. "You must never be noble again."

"We're so darn pathetic," he said brokenly. "Two helpless babes in the woods."

"Don't David." She covered his lips with the palm of her hand. "Here we are. You and I and the stars and the river. Let's not be pathetic tonight."

Above them swayed the feathery willow branches. The river washed with a drowsy murmur against the bank. Somewhere a bird twittered softly. The August moon, a disk of burnished copper, hung low in the cloudless sky. The air was fragrant with mint and honeysuckle, the damp earthy odor of ferns. Peace folded about them. The world seemed very far away.

"Love me?" Elizabeth asked softly.

He held her so close that she could hear the pounding of his heart.

"I adore you Beth."

"That's all that matters." She sighed happily. "I was wrong. They haven't licked us. There is one tiny hope still left."

"What's that?"

But she would not tell him. She never had told him about the scraps of paper she had found in the school house stove. That was a mystery she must solve herself. It seemed an impossible task. In the days that followed she devoted herself to a quest for further information. She burrowed through the dusty files of the "News." They gave her no assistance. Uncle Randolph's name was connected with that of Daniel Warren only in such harmless matters as hunting and fishing trips, or occasional jaunts to the races at Havre de Grace. She discovered nothing that might help her in any way.

She talked to Zeke but with no greater success. The old negro's mind was hazy and confused. He

rambled along about things that had happened in his youth, mumbled and chuckled to himself. He told her nothing more than she had learned from him that stormy afternoon months before. Elizabeth began to wonder if she had imagined the whole thing. But she did not give up. That was, at present, her only hope.

She interviewed Miss Phoebe who had, of course, known Uncle Randolph since he was a boy. She, too, said that he had scattered a few questionable oats before he had married Stella Selby and settled down to be a worthy citizen. That, she added, was to be expected of a high-spirited young man. Uncle Randolph had been no worse than most of Winchester's young blades and a great deal better than some. Good blood would tell, she declared with a snap of her sharp black eyes. For all their high and mighty airs she was forced to admit that there had never been a scandal in the Lloyd family. She did not remember that Uncle Randolph had been friendly with Dan Warren though men sometimes had cronies not acceptable to the women of the family. She dismissed the subject lightly. No help from Miss Phoebe. She made Elizabeth take a dose of sulphur and molasses because she looked peaked. She gathered her a basket of raspberries. That was all.

Elizabeth had not questioned Uncle Randolph further since the day she talked to him in his office. In fact, she scarcely talked to him at all. He was

away a great deal, making speeches in various parts of the country. When he was at home he spent most of his time at the office. In the presence of Grandmother or Aunt Dolly he was agreeable, even pleasant to Elizabeth. At other times he avoided her and not infrequently she found him watching her with a curious fixed intensity. But the secret, if there was one, seemed safe enough. Try as hard as she might, she could not solve the mystery.

Besides the campaign, Uncle Randolph was absorbed in more personal matters. Miss Emilie had accepted the honor. They were to be married in the fall. Miss Emilie's blushes and pretty confusion would have done credit to a far younger bride. Elizabeth was a little disgusted with the whole affair. There was, she thought, something almost indecent in Miss Emilie's raptures and Uncle Randolph's jaunty swagger. Youth is seldom sympathetic with a middle-aged romance. She was not able to share the satisfaction of the family in this worthy alliance.

Life, on the surface, was tranquil enough. A sort of armed neutrality existed between Elizabeth and Grandmother Lloyd. Elizabeth was polite but remote and detached. She would accept no favors. One afternoon she returned from the office to find a trim cream-colored roadster standing in the driveway. A card tied to the steering wheel informed her that it was a gift from Grandmother. She tore the card into fragments

and marched up the veranda steps holding her head very high. She never mentioned it to Grandmother. Nor did she use the car. Wash drove it into the garage and there it remained. Denied the one gift for which she had asked, Elizabeth wanted no other.

The days passed. The bridge was nearly finished. It was to be opened with appropriate ceremonies early in September. Elizabeth did not like to think of that. It meant an inevitable separation. David would go away — alone. The strained expression she had worn in the spring returned. She grew even thinner and ate scarcely anything at all. David was silent and depressed. Some times, however, hope being the heritage of youth, they were able to speak cheerfully of the separation, to plan for the future.

"We're young, David. We can wait."

"Two or three years. That's all."

It seemed an eternity. But they were determined, at that particular moment, to be brave.

"That isn't very long, David."

"I'll work like the devil."

"And I'll write stories. I can, you know."

"Of course you can."

"We'll buy the Hopewell house for Mother and a brand new flivver for us."

Then, drifting down the river beneath the starlight or listening to the rain on the boat house roof, they would be happy for a time.

But there were other moods, the gray moods which had no cheering threads of rose. Then hope flickered feebly and all but died away. They clung to each other, dreading the future, lost in a maze of questions and doubt. No miracle happened. Their lucky little gods seemed to have deserted them, indeed.

"You're so thin, Beth," he said as they sat one rainy evening in the shelter of the boat house.

"I don't sleep very well," she said wearily. "And I'm tired all the time."

"You mustn't fret, darling."

"I can't help it. I try not to. But it's all so uncertain."

"I know," he said miserably.

"I wouldn't mind waiting, if I were sure that sometime we'd find a way. So many things can happen. You might die. Somewhere far away."

"That doesn't sound like you, Beth."

"I don't feel like myself. My face doesn't look the same. I'm tired of fighting. I'd like to go to sleep and never wake up again." She sobbed against his shoulder while the rain drummed on the slanting roof and the wind sighed through the willows. "I'm tired, David. Why can't I go to sleep?"

"Don't, darling . . . Beth, my sweet." He pushed the damp hair back from her brow, kissed her eyes and her lips. "I can't stand it to have you miserable."

"Why," she sobbed, "must it be this way? Why won't they let us be happy?"

"Because," he said bitterly, "you're the royal princess and I am the junk man's boy."

"I hate them. I've worn myself out with hating them. Now I'm tired. I can't fight any more."

"And I'm helpless. I love you so much and there's nothing I can do."

"You can carry me up to the gate. Like you did the day I sprained my ankle. That seems such a long time ago."

"You were happy then." He lifted her from the sagging bench. "It's all my fault. I've never brought you anything but trouble."

"I love you, David." Her arms circled about his neck. "But I'm tired . . . so tired."

He followed the narrow path to the gate in the garden wall.

"Can't I carry you up to the door?"

"Some one might see you. I couldn't stand another scene."

She slipped through the circle of his arms until her feet touched the ground, stood there for a moment her cheek against his shoulder.

"Try to sleep, darling."

"I will. And to-morrow I'll feel better. The rain gives me the weary blues."

"There's so little time left."

"To-morrow and Thursday," she counted on her fingers. "And the bridge celebration on Friday. You won't go until Monday, David?"

"Tuesday or Wednesday, perhaps."

"And Ohio isn't very far away."

"I could return in a few hours."

"It's silly to cry." Her lips curved into a wan little ghost of a smile. "Nerves, I guess. And the wind and the rain . . . Good-night, David."

"Good-night, my Beth."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, dear . . . To-morrow."

She disappeared in the darkness. David heard the sound of her footsteps on the graveled path, the distant closing of a door. But he did not move. For a long time he leaned against the low barred gate, unconscious of the rain and mist, his troubled blue eyes straining towards the lights of the house. Then he plunged his hands in his pockets and strode off along the river road into town.

Chapter Fourteen

I

DAVID tramped grimly along the river road into town. All day it had been raining. The road was laced with puddles and the thick foliage of the bordering trees dripped mournfully. A raw wind drove the rain in slanting sheets, ridged the river with crested waves, cut through David's leather jacket. He was chilled and drenched to the skin. But the anxiety which lay like a weight on his heart numbed his physical discomfort. One thought only turned round and round in his mind. Elizabeth was unhappy. What could he do?

He recalled her listless voice . . . "I'm tired, David. So tired." . . . The plaintive words stabbed like tiny knives into his heart. Elizabeth was unhappy. Thin, too. He could span both of her wrists between his thumb and middle finger. There were shadows under her eyes. She couldn't sleep. And it was all his fault! David groaned and his hands knotted into hard firm fists. He loved her so much. Yet he had brought her nothing but unhappiness. "Fool!" he muttered to himself. "You might have known."

He thought of her as she had been early in the winter, radiant, sparkling with life. The sparkle

was gone now. His selfishness had destroyed it. He had tried to capture a star. And now he was punished for that folly of presumption. The star had lost its sparkle. Elizabeth was "Tired . . . so tired." He might have known better. She was a child, thinking that she might have whatever she fancied. She loved him. No question of that. But the obstacles were too great. He could not carry her away to be a gypsy with him. He should have known, should long ago have forseen and prevented this disaster. "Idiot!" he accused himself bitterly. The rosy future they had planned was only a dream. There were no fairy tales in this grim, work-a-day world . . . The Princess and the shepherd boy . . . Elizabeth was unhappy. What could he do?

David cut across the field that led to Jerry's tumbling stone house. But he did not go in. He thought it would be impossible to talk to Jerry tonight, to sit in the low dim room with the assorted clocks where he and Elizabeth had spent so many happy hours. Jerry, kind and sympathetic though he was, could not help. This was a battle he must fight alone. He strode on into Willow and around the corner to Main street. Winchester was storm-bound. The streets were nearly deserted. Occasionally a vague figure under an umbrella brushed past him. David scarcely saw them. The arc-lights bloomed like misty flowers through the rain. The trees, shaken by the wind, dropped sudden showers.

He tramped drearily on, his hands in his pockets, his hat brim pulled down low over his stormy blue eyes.

The drug store blazed with lights. A medley of voices, a snatch of music drifted out through the door. The glass globes in the window striped the pavement with ribbons of red and green. David did not stop there. A figure in a green slicker slipped out into the night, called a greeting to him. He answered without glancing around, strode on out of the lighted section into the gloom of Mulberry street.

His thoughts were not cheerful companions. David was fighting the hardest battle of his life. He knew, that for her sake, he must lose Elizabeth. The thought plunged him fathoms deep in desolation. David possessed no arts or poses to help him through the ordeal. He was not a willing martyr. He found no consolation in fancying himself a romantic and melancholy figure. He loved her simply and with all his heart. If it would help, he would cheerfully fight for her to the last grim ditch. But the thing which separated them could not be fought. He was entirely helpless. The only thing he could do was give her up and get out of the way.

He saw the years marching past in dreary procession, years without Elizabeth, endless days and tortured nights that must be endured. The thought was not to be borne. But he must bear it — for her. He could not watch her grow thinner

and more wretched. He must put her back high up in the sky where she belonged. Somehow he must return the sparkle that his clumsy hands had destroyed.

Never to see her again, her tawny bright hair, her amber eyes, the tilt at the end of her nose. Never to hold her close in his arms, feel her cheek against his, watch the delicate gestures of her slender gay hands. Never to camp out under the stars, watch the sun rise over the mountains . . . Madness to think of that now. He could not be selfish with Elizabeth. It didn't so much matter about him. He had never, except in the past few months, been really happy. But Elizabeth. She was fashioned for happiness. There was so little he could give her. He must somehow restore her sparkle, let her forget him, manage to take himself out of her life.

But how could he do that? Merely to go away would not solve the problem. He did not question her love for him. Formerly it had amazed and delighted him. Now it frightened him a little. Absence, even a long separation might not make her forget. She was brave and loyal. Stubborn, too. And proud. He must somehow manage to hurt her fierce young pride, make her hate him. Hate him! Elizabeth . . . David groaned again.

He recalled their conversation the day after he was hurt when she sat beside him on the bed . . .

"Couldn't anything make you hate me, Beth?"

"What a curious question, David."

"But — couldn't anything?"

"If you lied to me or were unfaithful, perhaps. I couldn't stand that" . . .

Tramping alone through the rain he heard her voice, slowly, thoughtfully repeating the words, smelled the roses she had brought mingled with the perfume of her hair, saw the grotesque little walnut shell gods standing in a row on the table. They had been happy then. Children amusing themselves with a fairy tale. Building a house in California, a frail impermanent castle in the air . . . Naming the children . . . David's throat felt dry and choked. He wished he were young enough to go back home and sob on Jerry's shoulder. Dear Jerry! He would have to hurt Jerry, too. Mustn't think of that now. There was something more important to be done. Pride to be hurt. A shining young love to be killed . . . "God!" he muttered. "What can I do?"

He arrived at Miss Phoebe's tidy white house, leaned for a moment against the picket fence. A lighted window told him that the mistress of the patchwork garden had not yet retired. He wanted to go in, to tell her about it, to find a little comfort, perhaps. The peppery little old lady was his friend. But she could not help him. No one could help him now. He must fight this battle alone.

The fragrance of the rain drenched phlox brought a thousand memories of Elizabeth. He saw her walking towards him down the path, her

arms filled with flowers, the soft sweet shine in her eyes. He recalled a dozen times that they had sat on the steps of the kitchen porch, immersed in the drowsy hush of evening, happy to be together, watching the twinkle of the fireflies through the shadows . . .

"We won't be rich, Beth."

"Who cares?"

"You'll miss — lots of things."

"Perhaps . . . But I'll have you."

They might have been happy together. She liked to play at being a gypsy. They asked for so little, only the sun and the wind and each other. No chance of that. The last little hope was gone. Her Grandmother would never permit it. She was bound by a cord which could not be severed. Better to make her forget. The best, the happiest part of her life should not be wasted in waiting for something they never might have.

David tramped on, leaving behind him the fragrance of the phlox. He wandered into the mill section over beyond the railroad tracks. Before him rose the massed, irregular factory walls, the stubby stacks trailing feathers of smoke. The houses here were small and shabby with bare front yards and staggering fences. David passed Tim Macey's pool room without noticing it. His tortured mind was absorbed in the grim business of finding a way to hurt Elizabeth. There was no guilty secret in his past which might serve this necessary purpose.

His college escapades, measured by the standards of a restless generation, were innocent enough. There had been only a few girls in his life. No one that mattered one way or the other. He rather regretted that now. Better to have provided for this emergency. Plans formed in his mind. He rejected them, hating lies and pretense, brooding miserably, tramping, without aim or direction, endlessly on and on.

A hand touched his arm. David swung around. The dim glow of the last arc-light disclosed Amy Phelps in a bright green slicker, her round childish face framed in wisps of yellow hair.

"Hello, Amy."

"Hello, Dave." She whirled a green umbrella behind her head. "Swell night for a walk."

"Terrible," he answered, conscious all at once of the rain and the chilly wind.

"You aren't very sociable."

"Why not?"

"I've followed you all the way out from the store. You didn't turn around once."

"I was thinking."

"Swell night for it." Her hand touched his coat. "Gosh, you must be soaked to the skin."

"I hadn't noticed it," he said dully.

"No wonder. Leaning on fences in all this rain."

"Only one fence, Amy."

"That was enough. You'll get pneumonia."

She tugged at his sleeve. "Come on in home and dry off."

"No thank you. I'm going back now."

"You'll be drowned. Come on, Dave. Have some sense. I'll stir up a fire and make you some coffee."

"Thank you, Amy, but—"

"Gosh, Dave, you aren't a duck. Come in while I get you Pop's slicker."

"I'm wet now. That wouldn't help."

"Some coffee would. Mom's not home. She's gone to the second show. Let me do that much for you, Dave."

His teeth were chattering. Funny. He hadn't realized that the wind was so cold. Coffee might help. It was a long way back to Jerry's.

"Thanks, Amy," he said. "All right."

❄ II ❄

There was an open stove in the shabby parlour at Amy's house. She waved aside his offer to help, and built a crackling fire.

"Now you sit here." She drew a plush rocker close to the stove, brought pillows from the sofa, satin pillows, very dirty, covered with a great deal of yellow lace.

"I'm not an invalid," David protested.

"You might be." She worried him out of his coat, hung it across the back of a chair. "And

here's Pop's slippers. One of 'em's sort of chewed lookin'. I found it under the kitchen stove. The way things get in this house is a scandal. Take off those wet shoes."

He obeyed her, smiling a little.

"You're a strong-minded woman, Amy."

She tossed her head.

"I don't care for drowned rats. Now dry up and dry off while I make you some coffee."

She bustled out into the kitchen, set up a great clashing of pans and stove lids. David was grateful for the warmth. He sank back in the plush rocker and stretched out his feet to the fire. His eyes strayed about the cluttered, dingy little room. Tough on the kid to have to live in a place like this. Her father was a night watchman at the mill. "Mom" was her step-mother, a huge blowsy woman, addicted to the movies. Amy wasn't a bad sort of kid. The fire felt good. He was very tired. If only for a little while he might not think . . .

"It's likely to take quite a while." Amy popped her head through the kitchen door. "In honor of special company I'm washing the coffee pot."

"Is that an unusual event?"

"Is it?" Amy shrugged her plump shoulders. "If ever I'd come home and find the sink clear of dishes, I'd drop in my tracks. Mom's delicate," she added with a mischievous smile and popped herself back into the kitchen.

David felt more tranquil. The heat made him drowsy. He lit a cigarette, blew a series of smoke rings toward the dingy ceiling. To-morrow he would decide what was best to be done. He was too weary, now, to think.

Amy brought in the coffee. It was hot and not too bitter. David sipped it gratefully and the weight of depression lifted a little. Amy sat on a low hassock beside his chair. She stirred the coffee daintily. David watched her curiously. She had nice hands. But her hair! Good heavens!

"What peculiar thing have you done to it now?" he asked.

"Done to what?" Her round, china blue eyes lifted in an expression of surprise.

"Your hair."

"Oh that . . . I'm letting the dyed part grow out. Looks like a mangy cat, doesn't it?"

"The effect is a bit queer. Why are you doing that?"

"I found out gentlemen don't prefer them so much as you'd think," she answered flippantly. "Some gentlemen, anyways." Then her voice softened and her eyes turned to the fire. "Don't you remember, Dave. You told me once you thought it looked fierce."

"I did? . . . When?"

"The last time you danced with me. And that," she said pointedly, "was a good while ago."

"You've remembered all this time?"

"I guess I've remembered everything you ever said to me." She stirred her coffee thoughtfully, her eyes gazing into the fire.

"I'll have to be careful what I say to you," David said lightly.

"There don't so many of them talk decent that you can forget the ones that do. That's a mixed up sentence." She smiled up at him. "But I guess you know what I mean. And I haven't forgotten what you did for me, Dave."

"The trouncing I gave Parker Todd?"

She nodded her head.

"Bunk!" David said, very much embarrassed. "That was for my own amusement. I needed exercise that night."

"Nothing like that ever happened to me before," she said slowly. "They've fought plenty to get their hands on me. But none of them ever fought and won and walked away . . . I've never been out with him since."

"Well, I should hope not."

"It isn't as easy as all that. He shows you a swell time. But I couldn't. Not after that night. He's a toad, anyway. Puffed up and red in the face . . . I oughtn't to be talking about him." She looked up at him searchingly. "He'll be a sort of relation of yours."

David shook his head.

"Is it all off, Dave?" she asked with a little catch in her voice.

David did not answer. He could not talk to Amy about Elizabeth. With fingers none too steady he lit another cigarette.

"I'm sorry I asked you," she said after an interval of silence.

"That's all right."

"I know all about the rumpus. It made me mad. You're too good for them anyway."

"Oh well—" David stared into the fire. "What's the use?"

"That's what I say," Amy agreed. "What's the use of anything? If you weren't born on the right side of town you haven't a chance."

"What would you like to do?" David asked in an attempt to steer the conversation into another channel.

"Get out of this dump. Have things clean and decent around me for once."

"Why don't you go?"

"Too lazy, I guess. Can't save up money enough. I'd earn more in the mill." Amy looked at her pretty hands. "But what kind of a life is that? The looms would drive me crazy. It's nice in the store."

"Is there any special thing you would rather do?"

"I'd like to work in a beauty shop. Maybe own one of my own sometime. That's my second wish on the first star every night. That's crazy, you know," she confessed. "'Star light, star bright,' but I always do it."

"What's the first wish?"

Amy flushed. The warm pink spread down into her creamy throat. For a moment she looked silently at the tips of her fingers. Then she threw back her head and laughed.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Of course."

She crossed the room to a Victrola in the corner, selected a record and whirled the crank.

"Aren't you going to tell me?" David asked.

"Sure . . . My first wish is that I'd lose ten pounds."

David smiled. Funny she had blushed about a thing like that. Girls talked freely enough of the pounds they would like to lose. Then he forgot about it. The smile vanished. His lips set into a thin firm line. Amy had started the Victrola. A husky voice crooned softly above the whir of the revolving disk.

"Fish gotta swim; birds gotta fly.
I gotta love one man 'til I die.
Can't help lovin' that man of mine."

"Take that thing off!" David said sharply.

Amy was hurt.

"Don't you like it, Dave? I think it's swell." Her voice, too, was soft and husky. "Whenever I play it—"

"Please, Amy." His hands gripping the arms of the chair were white across the knuckles.

"All right." Her red lips quivered, her round blue eyes were filmed with tears. "I'd do anything you asked me, Dave."

"Would you, Amy?" he asked quickly.

"Anything at all."

"Come here."

She moved slowly across the room and stood beside him, a wondering, startled expression in her eyes.

"Sit here. Where you were before."

She dropped down on the hassock and raised her wondering eyes.

"What is it, Dave?"

"Listen, Amy," David began, "and don't say a word 'til I'm through" . . .

As David talked, the wonder faded out of Amy's round blue eyes and an expression of cunning took its place. She listened quietly, her head dropped a little, her eyes fixed on the tips of her pretty tapering fingers. Not once did she interrupt with a word or a gesture. When he finished she raised her head and smiled up at him.

"Sure, Dave," she said. "Sure, I will . . . All right."

❋ III ❋

"Where have you been, David?" Jerry laid aside his pipe.

"Walking."

"In the rain?"

"I was under cover part of the time."

He removed "Pop's" slicker, shook the rain from his hat.

"Want I should make somethin' hot?"

"No thanks."

"Come here where it's warm. Bless me, I can't remember whenever I've built a fire in August. Must be a ragin' Nor'easter on the coast."

David dropped wearily into his familiar chair on the opposite side of the hearth. Jerry talked of Nor'easters and storms at sea. In his early wandering life he had touched at many points. There was, apparently, no land or climate with which he was not familiar. Presently David interrupted.

"Jerry," he said slowly, "you never let me tell you how much I appreciate all you've done for me."

"Fiddlesticks! The score's even, Davie me lad."

"I think you're the kindest person in the world."

"Shucks! Kind to myself. That's all." Jerry coughed. "Think I'd enjoy livin' here alone? I'm not so fond of my own voice as all that comes to."

"Remember that, will you Jerry?" David's voice was grave. His eyes in the flickering light of the fire were young and tortured and very blue. "I'll be grateful to you as long as I live."

Jerry, sadly embarrassed by this unexpected display of sentiment, rose from his chair.

"We'll have no talk of gratitude," he said gruffly. "If ever you owed me anything, you've paid the debt in full." He walked across the hearth, placed his hand awkwardly on David's bowed head. "I always wanted a son. Seems as if Providence meant I shouldn't be disappointed." His hand lingered upon the tumbled dark hair. "You've been all of that and more. We'll have no talk of gratitude. I'm proud of you, Davie me lad."

Then he coughed once or twice, blew his nose and, scowling very fiercely, walked out of the room.

The fire burned itself into a gray heap of ashes. The wind grew calm and the rain ceased to rattle against the windows. Still David sat beside the hearth, slumped down in the sagging chair, his tortured young eyes staring into the shadows. He was bidding a last farewell to the low dim room, to the iron fire dogs, to Jerry and Elizabeth. The David who long ago had played a childish game to please his mother could play a grimmer game to save Elizabeth from unhappiness. The assorted clocks ticked away the hours. Exhausted by conflicting emotions he sagged deeper in the chair. When the first pink flush of dawn crept through the windows he was fast asleep, his head pillowed wearily on his arm.

Chapter Fifteen

I

GRANDMOTHER'S Victoria, newly painted and gleaming with polished metal rolled down the driveway between the double line of poplars. Zeke, in his plum-colored coat and ancient silk hat, occupied the driver's seat. One white gloved hand held the reins; the other, a slender whip with bandings of silver and a crimson tassel. The whip was for style merely and not for use. Nothing less powerful than a stick of dynamite could have persuaded the lazy old carriage horses, sleek and fat and well groomed, to travel at any pace faster than a leisurely trot. But the whip was Zeke's symbol of magnificence. It indicated, as did his "store teeth," his lofty collar, even the carriage itself, that an event of great importance was about to take place. Nor were the signs misleading. This afternoon the new bridge was to be opened with appropriate ceremonies. All Winchester had declared a holiday. Grandmother Lloyd was faring forth to the celebration in a fitting and suitable fashion. Grandmother seldom missed an opportunity to put on a good show.

She sat very erect against the plum-colored upholstery; tiny, exquisite, sparkling with jewels. Her small kid slippers, traced with a delicate pattern

of beadwork, rested upon a footstool. Grandmother seemed to regard as an accomplishment the fact that her feet would not reach down to the carriage floor. To be small and daintily formed was a mark of gentility. She scorned large, robust, hearty women. A diminutive parasol with ruffles of sheer black lace and a crooked ebony handle added a touch of elegance. It, like Zeke's whip, was merely for style. The mild September sunshine could not have marred the delicate texture of the famous Randolph complexion. But Grandmother had an eye for effects, a passion for pageantry. She wore her most regal manner, as conscious as was old Zeke of the fact that they were on parade. At times she turned to acknowledge with a bow the greeting of an acquaintance. If the acquaintance chanced to be a Sherman, a Dorrance or a Todd, the bow was accompanied by a frosty smile. Grandmother wasted her favors upon no persons of lesser importance.

Beside her sat Miss Emilie Trueworthy, happy Miss Emilie, soon to become a member of the royal family. Her manner was eager and deferential. She devoted herself to Grandmother's remarks, smiled a bit too brightly at the tiny old lady's acid wit. Elizabeth, sitting beside Aunt Dolly on the opposite seat, watched the little comedy. Miss Emilie, she thought scornfully, would be an agreeable addition to the family. Grandmother would bully and boss her and tell people how delighted she was that dear Randolph had selected so wisely.

Secretly she would despise Miss Emilie for her fawning and lack of spirit. Why should Grandmother try to destroy the thing she admired most, independence, a high and valiant spirit? People were like that. It made life very difficult. Elizabeth dismissed with an impatient sigh the question she could not answer.

The ladies chattered amiably as the carriage rolled under the leafy arch of Chestnut street. Elizabeth had no part in the conversation. She leaned against the soft upholstery, silent, remote, absorbed in her own perplexing thoughts. The thoughts were perplexing, indeed. Something had happened to David, something strange and frightening which she could neither understand nor explain. Since the stormy evening two days ago when the rain had drummed on the boathouse roof and the wind had sighed through the willows, she had seen him only twice. Each time he had been quiet and aloof. He seemed somehow already to have gone away from her. She could not reach him. All her attempts had failed. Finally, too proud to try any longer, she had retreated into a shut-away part of herself, hurt, bewildered, unhappy. The time left to them was so short. Folly to waste the last precious hours. What had happened to David, to her?

One explanation only she had been able to find and that filled her with dull sickening dread. All last night, through the pale hours of the sleepless dawn, all the long day she had tried to put it out of her

mind. Now she forced herself to think of it calmly. The girl from the drug store was somehow involved, Amy Phelps with her brassy gold hair and her red pouting lips.

Last night David had left the boathouse early. Work to do, he said. Business about the bridge. Later, Wash had driven her in town to call at Miss Phoebe's. They had sat on the tiny front porch, talking about the garden, the cats, the voracious goat next door. It was peaceful there. Insects hummed in the honey suckle vines; the wind from the river was cool and fragrant. Elizabeth had felt her anxiety drifting away, had convinced herself that she imagined the change in David. Miss Phoebe, after a while, had gone in the house for cookies and ginger beer. Elizabeth remained on the porch alone, moving the rocker gently to and fro, sure that the change was a fancy, happier than she had been for many days. And then she had seen them, David and Amy Phelps, walking past arm in arm, very close together. David had lied to her. Business about the bridge! Walking with Amy Phelps, arm in arm, through the warm September night. David had lied to her. There was terror in the thought . . .

The carriage approached the river park where the festivities were to be held. It was lined with automobiles. Flags and pennants, loops of bunting fluttered in the wind. The band played valiantly in a heroic clamor of brassy discords. A man at the

entrance was selling balloons and gay paper pinwheels. People in holiday humor and holiday clothes milled endlessly about. Children, sticky with pop-corn and ice-cream cones, darted through the crowd, trailing behind them ripples of shrill laughter. The "News" had predicted a rousing celebration. It had not exaggerated. Winchester welcomed a holiday. There had been nothing of importance to celebrate since the Fourth of July.

The crowd gave way before the horses, and the carriage advanced to a reserved space in the line of cars. Zeke dismounted and stood at attention, whip in hand. Uncle Randolph detached himself from a group of dignitaries and came to greet them.

"I've had chairs reserved," he said, his handsome features wreathed in a mellow smile. "You can't hear at this distance." Hearing well was an important matter since Uncle Randolph himself was to make the principal address.

Aunt Dolly and Miss Emilie were assisted from the carriage amid a rustle of silk, a tinkling of bangles, a little flutter of excited remarks.

"Won't you come, Mother?" Uncle Randolph asked.

"I'll stay where I am," said the little old lady. "I have no liking for wooden chairs."

"Elizabeth?"

"No thank you, Uncle Randolph." Elizabeth slipped into the place beside Grandmother. "It's much more comfortable here."

Uncle Randolph, with a flushed and smiling lady on either arm, moved toward a row of chairs near the platform. Zeke stood at the horses' heads, his hand on the bridle rein. The precaution was unnecessary. "Duke" and "Prince" were accustomed to bands and celebrations. Grandmother, conscious of staring eyes, became more regal than ever. She held court in the Victoria. People came to greet her, Judge Sherman, the surviving Trueworthys, various members of the Winchester élite. Grandmother was in her element. She loved being the center of attraction. Presently Uncle Randolph, escorted by the burgess and the chief of police, mounted the bunting draped platform. The band, perspiring and magnificent, in scarlet and gold, burst into the stirring strains of the "Star Spangled Banner" and the ceremonies began.

Elizabeth, sitting beside Grandmother, paid scant attention to the program. Her eyes searched through the crowd, looking for David. She saw Sally Sherman and surly Ned Cannon, Brenda Lee moving through the crowd with a note book and pencil, Marjory Todd and the Tilghman girls. Directly across the way Lloyd lounged behind the wheel of Aunt Julia's sedan. He waved to her and she answered in a preoccupied fashion. There between Judge Sherman's Packard and Mrs. Burgess Wade's new coupe stood Jerry's blue junk wagon with its bright red wheels and strings of jingling bells. Jerry, sitting very erect on the sagging seat,

radiated pride and importance. He, too, had arrived in state. But David — Where was he?

David had lied to her. That thought emerged sharply from the vague confusion of Elizabeth's mind . . . Work to do, he had said. Business about the bridge. Walking with Amy Phelps . . . Nonsense! She tried to be fair. He had met her by chance, perhaps . . . Arm in arm, very close together . . . What claim did she have on David? Elizabeth recalled the day after he was hurt when she sat beside him in the shabby low-ceilinged room and Jerry had come in to announce that the girl was waiting downstairs . . .

"She must be fond of you, David?"

"Bunk!" He had flushed. "I helped her out of a scrape one night."

"Tell me about it?"

"Can't . . . I promised" . . .

Why couldn't he tell her about it? Elizabeth stirred restlessly against the plum-colored cushions. Was he somehow involved with Amy Phelps? The thought made her feel faint and a little sick. David, her David, with his deep blue eyes and his crooked smile; David and Amy Phelps. Perhaps he had lied to her all along. She couldn't believe that. If David failed her, where in all the world was there truth and loyalty? Nonsense! She was upset and worn with anxiety. She magnified trifles. Nothing had changed. David, in those long-ago days, had never failed her. He would not fail her now . . .

Burgess Wade introduced Uncle Randolph. The crowd cheered and applauded. A deafening din of motor horns filled the air. Uncle Randolph struck an imposing gesture, the fingers of his left hand thrust into his vest. The noise subsided and Uncle Randolph began to speak. He talked a great deal about Democracy . . . Bunk, Elizabeth thought, using David's favorite word. Grandmother's carriage, Zeke in his high silk hat, proved the fallacies of that time-honored institution . . . David — where was he? . . . Uncle Randolph looked very handsome . . . Democracy . . . He had not been willing to give David a chance . . . The scraps of paper in the school house stove . . . "For the honor of our glorious country." Posing! The pink carnation in his coat lapel . . . David walking with Amy Phelps . . . "I've never cared about anyone else, Beth" . . . Business about the bridge . . . Arm in arm, very close together, strolling like lovers through the warm September night . . .

The fragments of thought whirling through Elizabeth's head were checked abruptly. She sat forward on the edge of the seat, her hands twisted tightly together, her eyes widened in an expression of horror and incredulity. David was walking toward the carriage, a boisterous, disheveled David, moving unsteadily, attracting a great deal of attention. Amy Phelps, in a flower-wreathed hat, clung to his arm, her round childish face raised to his,

giggling, ecstatic, holding by its string an enormous red balloon. They seemed entirely absorbed in each other. David's tousled dark head bent toward the flower-wreathed hat. He spoke to her and Amy giggled rapturously. There in the sight of curious eyes he fed her bits of popcorn and laughed when the crumbs spilled down over her chin. The crowd, neglecting Uncle Randolph, watched with obvious interest. Grandmother watched and smiled grimly. Elizabeth watched, also, and felt the carriage seat slipping away from under her. David was contributing a feature of interest to the rousing celebration.

Their zig-zag course brought them past the carriage, so close that Elizabeth might have touched David's shoulder. He did not look at her, was apparently unaware of her existence. His eyes rested upon Amy's upturned face. He said something to her. Amy laughed and cuddled closer against him. The brim of her flower-wreathed hat touched his cheek.

"Go on, Dave," she said quite loudly. "Tell me all over again."

Elizabeth tried to call him, but his name caught in her throat. David, she thought, was doing this on purpose, humiliating, ignoring her. He must have seen the carriage. He must have known that she was there. David . . . She must not make a scene. People were watching, Sally Sherman, Grandmother, the Tilghmans. Whispers buzzed

like swarming bees. Hundreds of staring eyes. This was a dream. She would wake up presently. But the balloon was real. It bobbed past her and out of sight. Amy's giggle thinned into silence. A whiff of her perfume remained. Elizabeth thought she would smell it as long as she lived. "Fleur de Printemps," one ninety-eight in a ruby flask . . . People were watching. She saw the gleam of triumph in Grandmother's bright blue eyes. David . . . Again the name caught in her throat. She sank back into a corner of the seat, trembling, frightened, desperately winking back a rising flood of tears.

"Very gratifying," Grandmother murmured. Whether she referred to David's performance or to Uncle Randolph's remarks, Elizabeth did not try to decide. A numbness crept over her. The sunshine lost its warmth, the sky its shining blue. There was in the world no truth, no loyalty. David had failed her. David had disappeared with Amy Phelps, a bag of popcorn and a silly red balloon.

❋ II ❋

Elizabeth paced back and forth across the boathouse landing, her eyes peering anxiously through the shadows, her heart thumping at every sound. David would come . . . "To-morrow evening at the boathouse," he had said when he left her last night . . . David would come . . . "You were

being noble," she would say. "You tried to hurt me so I'd hate you. Dear big stupid! You mustn't be noble with me" . . . Then his arms would fold around her and close, very close to him, her cheek against his, she would forget the hurt and humiliation of the afternoon . . . "We can wait, Davie darling. There's all of life before us. I won't be unhappy. I love you, I love you, my dear" . . .

The twilight deepened. The trees on the opposite shore of the river were smudged with shadows. No wind. The willow branches hung motionless. A bird twittered a drowsy song. The sky was pricked with stars . . . Like pins in a dark silk cushion . . . Strange the thoughts that popped into your head . . . The wagon and the star . . . "Here I am, David. I've dropped down into your lap. The sky is vast and lonely. I'd rather live close to you. We can wait. There must be happiness somewhere ahead. David, my David, you mustn't be noble with me" . . .

Weary of pacing, Elizabeth sank down on the landing, rested her tawny bright head against a post. David would come . . . "To-morrow evening at the boathouse" . . . David always kept his word. Dear big stupid! He had done that dreadful thing because he thought she was unhappy. How could she have doubted? There was no love without perfect faith. David was being noble. She must believe that . . . "Bad blood. I told you so," Grandmother had said in gloating triumph.

"You see, I knew best, my dear" . . . But Grandmother did not know. She hated David and was glad to misjudge him . . . Mother believed in David. Impossible to know him and ever be able to doubt . . . Eight o'clock! How plainly you could hear the strokes of the court house clock when the night was clear and windless . . . David would come. Soon, now, very soon . . .

A rocket shot up into the air, tracing a fiery arc against the sky. It exploded with a muffled crack, scattered showers of colored stars. Fireworks from the river park. The band was playing . . . "There'll be a hot time in the old town to-night" . . . Elizabeth heard the brassy strains, muted and dulled by the distance . . . "A hot time in the old town to-night" . . . Soldiers had marched to that tune a very long time ago . . . The Spanish-American war . . . Uncle Randolph had been a soldier then. Perhaps they were playing it for him. Strange to think of Uncle Randolph in a uniform, slim and young and handsome, marching off to fight the Spaniards. To-night he wore a frock coat and a pink carnation. He was there in the river park, slapping gentlemen on the back, bowing very low over ladies' hands . . . Democracy . . . Bunk! . . . Uncle Randolph was posing, basking in admiration, being gallant to Miss Emilie in her ashes-of-roses gown . . . The scraps of paper in the school house stove . . . If she could find out what Uncle Randolph knew about David's father . . .

Something . . . He was frightened . . . The fireworks were lovely . . . Showers of colored stars . . . "A hot time in the old town to-night" . . . Quite dark now. The days were growing shorter. Half past eight . . . Where was David? . . .

Footsteps sounded along the road, hurrying footsteps, loud on the hard packed earth, soft on the weed grown path. Elizabeth held her breath. The footsteps grew nearer, mounted the steps of the boathouse, clattered across the uneven planking.

"David," she cried, in grateful relief. "Davie darling, I knew you would come."

There was no immediate answer. She scrambled up from the landing, stood quite still beneath the trailing willows, her fingers laced over her heart.

"David," she cried again, her voice less steady and confident.

"You here, Miss Lisabeth?" asked a voice from the shadows.

A dim figure emerged from the darkness. Rinthy, attired in festive raiment, came toward Elizabeth, teetering precariously on heels alarmingly high.

"What is it, Rinthy?" Elizabeth asked quickly.

Rinthy was obviously excited, almost breathless with haste and the importance of her message.

"Ah done look all ovah fo' you, Miss Lisabeth," she panted. "Lina say she doan know where you went an' Zeke he doan say nothing. Yo' Mothah say yo' might be out heah. Ah done ruined

mah dancin' slippahs," she added regretfully, "traipsin' in de grass. Seem like Ah always — "

Rinthy was inclined to be garrulous. Elizabeth checked her abruptly.

"What is it, Rinthy?" she asked sharply. "What's happened?"

"Devilment, dat's what Ah say," she answered. "Dey lef' on de evenin' train, Miss Lisabeth. Bold as brass wid suitcases an' all."

Swift suspicion; a twinge of fright shot into Elizabeth's heart.

"Who? What is it, Rinthy? What do you mean?"

"Mistah David an' the Phelps girl what worked in de drug store. May Gawd strike me daid ef dat ain't de gospel truff."

"No, Rinthy . . . No!"

"Now, don't you feel bad, Miss Lisabeth." Rinthy drew a long gusty sigh. "Dat's de way wid men. No trustin' 'em out ob yo' sight. Dar's mah gent'man frien', Mistah Gawge Dingle, cuttin' eyes at Miss Julia's Roxy de minute ah turns mah back. Men am deceivin', Miss Lisabeth, an' dat's de gospel truth."

Elizabeth felt her knees grow weak. She steadied them with an effort.

"Did you see them, Rinthy? Are you sure?"

"Sure as ah live an' breathe, Miss Lisabeth," Rinthy assured her earnestly. "She were all dressed up. Silk dress, lace stockin', hat wid roses.

An' Mistah David were totin' two suitcases. Where yo' reckon they're goin'?"

"I don't know," Elizabeth answered faintly. "How did — Why were you at the station?"

"Mistah David, he axe me to come dar. Ah seen him when ah was walkin' out wid mah gent'man friend, Mistah Gawge Dingle, dis aftahnoon. 'You come down to de evenin' train, Rinthy,' he say. 'Ah wants you to take somethin' to Miss Lisabeth.' He gib me two dollahs," Rinthy added in great satisfaction. "Ah gwine buy a gole ring fo' mah gent'man frien' if he promise not to cut no mo' capahs wid Miss Julia's Roxy. Why did Mistah David go way wid dat doll-face girl from the drug store? Dat's a question ah should like to axe."

"So should I, Rinthy," Elizabeth said holding on tightly to a post and she moaned ever so faintly, a forlorn desolate little sound lost at once in the gentle murmur of the willows. "Did he — Did David give you something for me?"

"A note," Rinthy answered and unfastened the clasp of an enormous handbag. "He call me roun' to de side of the station an' he say, 'Gib dis to Miss Lisabeth, Rinthy.' An' he had a kind ob wild look in his eyes. May Gawd strike me daid, Miss Lisabeth, if his face wasn't white as a sheet. 'Gib dis here to Miss Lisabeth,' he say an' — "

"Let me have it. Give it to me, please."

"Whar yo' reckon . . . Oh, here it is." Rinthy produced from the bag a small three cor-

nered note. "Seem kinda funny Mistah David take up wid dat po' white trash aftah mixin' wid de quality. What you reckon gits into men, Miss Lisabeth?"

But the question received no answer. Rinthy found herself alone on the boat house landing. Elizabeth had snatched the note and was gone.

❋ III ❋

"It's not true. It can't be," Elizabeth sobbed as she ran under the arbor along the garden path. "David and Amy Phelps . . . It's a dream. Like this afternoon. A horrible sort of nightmare . . . David and Amy Phelps . . . He always keeps his word . . . But the dew on the grape vines is real, and the grass and the trees and the stars . . . Dreams seem real sometimes . . . You were being noble. Davie, darling, you mustn't be noble with me . . . It can't be real . . . I'll wake up soon . . . But the note is real and the ache in my heart . . . David gone with Amy Phelps . . . Oh God, let it please be a dream!"

She ran up the steps and across the back veranda. Grandmother Lloyd, sitting alone in the darkness, called to her but she did not pause. Through the hall, up the wide polished stairs she sped, her feet winged with fear. Safe in her own room she closed the door and snapped on the light in an amber lamp on the table beside her bed.

"It can't be real. Oh God, let it please be a dream" . . .

With trembling fingers she smoothed out the sheet of paper. Her eyes were blurred with tears. She was obliged to wink very rapidly before she could read the message that David had sent. For a moment she sat on the side of the bed holding the paper in her hand, gazing with troubled, tear-filmed eyes at the two brief lines penned in a hasty scrawl. Then a faint little moan slipped through her parted lips. She crumpled into a desolate heap on the yellow barred counterpane and buried her face in her arms.

The three cornered note fluttered to the floor, lay writing side up in the circle of amber light. It was a simple message but Elizabeth understood. David had written briefly:

"It's no use, Beth. The wagon was too rickety and the star too far away."

Chapter Sixteen

❋ I ❋

THE days following the bridge celebration passed very slowly. Elizabeth moved about in a sort of waking dream, too restless to be still for a moment, conscious of nothing save the grim fact that David had gone away. She did not go to the "News" office. She had apparently forgotten its very existence. None of the dainty dishes Lina prepared could tempt her to eat. She slept only in fitful snatches. Her eyes were enormous in the pale oval of her face. There was an expression of pain in them which caused Lina to remark with a doleful shake of her turbaned head. "If dat chile don't let herself loose, she gwine to bust like a firecracker." Even Grandmother was alarmed.

"You must eat, Elizabeth."

"I couldn't . . . I'd choke."

"Let Lina make you an egg-nog."

"No thank you, Grandmother."

"Or a toddy with brandy and mint."

"I don't want anything."

"There's no sense in your acting this way."

"How do you know? Let me alone. I want to be alone."

She would wander outdoors, under the arbor

hung now with purpling grapes, through the gate in the garden wall to the boathouse beside the river. But only for a moment. The willows swaying in the wind, the fragrance of the mint among the fern were intolerable. Everywhere there were memories of David. Presently she would return, walking with listless steps, her eyes widened in a blank, unseeing gaze. It was as though a spell had been laid upon her and she must wander until she dropped from exhaustion. Mother was almost frantic.

"You must rest, darling."

"I can't, Mother."

"You'll be ill."

"That doesn't matter. I don't care. I wish I could die."

"Elizabeth!"

"Perhaps David is — dead."

"Hush, darling. Don't talk that way. You must be sensible. You're worrying Grandmother."

"She ought to worry. It's all her fault. I hate Grandmother. She drove David away . . . David and Amy Phelps."

"Now dear — "

"Don't tell me she knows best. You can't think that, Mother, even if you are an alabaster saint. I hate her. She's a selfish, wicked old woman. I shall hate her as long as I live."

She never cried. Sometimes at night when the house was still and the wind sighed through the poplars, she tried to ease with tears the ceaseless

ache in her heart. But the tears would not come. She would lie for hours wide awake in the huge carved bed, as still, as rigid as the china shepherdess on the fireplace mantel. When at last she fell asleep, it was a restless and troubled slumber which brought neither peace nor relaxation. The shadows beneath her eyes grew larger. Her face was a strained white mask. Sometimes when Zeke came in with the mail it would brighten for a moment with quick eager hope. Then the flame would vanish, leaving again that still, strained white mask.

There was no news from David. All Jerry's efforts, the search instigated by the construction company were in vain. The runaways were traced as far as the Junction and there the trail ended. They seemed to have disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed them. Winchester buzzed with whispers. Gossip flourished like weeds. The scandal about David's father was taken out of camphor balls and thoroughly aired. There was a perpetual gleam of triumph in Grandmother's cold blue eyes. "I told you so. Like father like son," she remarked in and out of season. And "I told you so," was the echoing chant of the Winchester élite.

The whispers, the comments had no effect upon Elizabeth. Her faith did not waver. She knew why David had done this dreadful thing. The three cornered note that Rinthy had brought was worn into tatters. She carried it close to her heart.

David had gone away because he thought she was unhappy, had taken himself out of her life. It was worse for him than for her. He had given up his home, the work that he loved, his hope of future advancement. Dear stupid gallant David! If she might know that he was safe . . .

Nothing could shake her faith, not even the scene she had witnessed, quite by accident, at Jerry's. She had stopped there late in the afternoon of the day after David had gone. Jerry was not in sight. She walked around the house to look for him in the back yard. Voices, angry voices, caused her to pause in the shelter of the lilac bushes by the low open window. Amy's father, her blowsy hysterical stepmother were talking to Jerry. They said things about David. Dreadful things. Elizabeth, crouching beside the window, felt soiled and humiliated. But it could not shake her faith. David was not like that. He was clean and decent and fine. She never told Jerry that she had witnessed the scene. She tried to forget it. Sometimes at night she thought of it and anger burned her heart.

She went often to the old stone house at the edge of town. Jerry was always cheerful. He refused to give up hope. But cheerfulness was an obvious effort. The laughing twinkles were gone from his eyes. They sat in the warm September dusk under the crabapple trees, Elizabeth in the hammock, Jerry smoking in an ancient arm chair. Rags, the shaggy small dog, would lie on the grass

between them, his nose on his paws, his eyes turning in mute appeal from one of them to the other. Rags wore an air of melancholy. He mourned and would not be comforted. The neighborhood cats were safe. Their arch enemy had no heart for fighting since David had gone away.

Sometimes they sat in complete silence, watching the fireflies flit like winged jewels through the tall weedy grass, or the moon rise out of the river. Sometimes they talked.

"Where do you suppose he is now, Jerry?"

"Wish to God I knew."

"He did it because of me."

"Crazy young idiot!"

"It was brave, Jerry. David was always brave."

"Piece of foolishness."

"He thought I was unhappy . . . Do you suppose they are married?"

"No . . . Nor within a hundred miles of each other."

"If I knew he was safe, I think I could bear even that."

"Don't you fret, honey. We'll bring him back. Durned crazy young cub!"

Then Jerry would cough and blow his nose with a blast like the trumpets that tumbled the walls of Jericho.

Elizabeth told him about Uncle Randolph and the scraps of paper she had found in the school

house stove. Jerry listened attentively but made no comment. She did not know until later what an impression her story had made. Jerry exhausted every means of finding the truth of the matter. He talked to everyone who might know, searched through old records, beguiled the ancients of Winchester into reminiscence. Blackmail meant nothing to Jerry. He would have undertaken anything to bring David safely back home. But his efforts met with no success. The secret, if there was one, was safely buried in the past.

There was someone else in Winchester who still believed in David. Miss Phoebe's friendship, once it had been given, was lasting and loyal. Elizabeth often sat on the steps of her kitchen porch under the rioting pumpkin vines. She could talk there. At home she was numb and silent, shut in with walls of glass.

"David didn't do anything wrong, Miss Phoebe."

"Who says he did?"

"People."

"Hump! What won't people say? They'd better be mending the flaws in themselves."

"He did it because he thought it made me unhappy to love him."

"Seems as though."

"I know it, Miss Phoebe . . . And Grandmother gloats."

"Sinful pride! Though, mind you, I'm not taking sides."

"Will I ever see him again?"

"I'm no fortune teller or any kin to the Almighty, but I've a sort of feeling you will. So you'd better get some meat on your bones or he'll think you're somebody's scare-crow and not worth a lift of his hand."

Then Miss Phoebe would trot into the house for cup-cakes and milk or raspberry tarts with flutings of crinkled pie-crust around the edge. Elizabeth would eat a little, perhaps, and watch Miss Phoebe's shuttle threading cobwebs of lace. The cats, Primrose, Pansy, Peter, the lordly, would rub against her ankles and beg to be petted. There was peace in the patchwork garden, gay with autumn flowers, tranquil with sunlight and the soft wind from the river. Elizabeth would feel the ache in her heart lessen a little. Dear Miss Phoebe. Was she right? Would they ever see David again?

But a week passed and there was no news of David. Elizabeth's restlessness increased. Life at "The Poplars" was far from pleasant. Mother was anxious and distressed, poor futile little Mother, helpless and wanting so much to help. Aunt Dolly wavered between tears and excitement, searching the papers for accidents and suicides, fortelling dire calamities with the art of a second Cassandra. Uncle Randolph watched her covertly, pretended not to see her at all. Grandmother secretly made a number of plans and patiently bided her time. Elizabeth went into the library one evening to find her half submerged in travel pamphlets.

"Here you are, Elizabeth; Brittany, Spain, Japan, Honolulu. Where would you like to go?"

"With you?"

"I'm a good sailor and not decrepit yet. We'll take your Mother. A leisurely trip will be splendid for her."

"It would cost a great deal of money."

"I think I can afford it."

"And the Hopewell house costs so little! No thank you, Grandmother. I don't care for consolation gifts."

Fury raged in her heart. It shattered the still walls of glass. That evening she cried for the first time, lying face down in the grass at the end of the garden under the apricot tree. Zeke found her there.

"Miss 'Lisbeth, honey, doan you cry like all dat."

No answer save a muffled sob.

Zeke, with some difficulty, knelt on the grass beside her, laid his knotted old hand on her hair.

"Plenty other folks has trubble, honey. You ain't alone in dat. Best dry yo' eyes and chirk up."

"What's the use, Zeke? What's the use?"

"Yo' listen to me, Miss Lisabeth, an min' what an ole man say. 'Tain't no use wearin' yo'self wid grief. Yesterday's sun done set," he continued in a quavering sing-sing, suggestive of camp-meeting tunes. "Last year's rain am dry. Better let ole sorrows rest an' think ob what's comin' to-morrow."

His words fell upon heedless ears. Elizabeth continued to weep, her head buried in her arms, her shoulders shaking with sobs. Presently the old man rose stiffly and shuffled off through the shadows, mumbling and muttering to himself. He did not understand all that had happened. But he knew the face of sorrow. The child was grieving herself to death.

Elizabeth sobbed until she was exhausted. Then she turned over and lay quietly in the soft grass, her arms folded under her head. The twilight deepened into darkness. Through the foliage of the apricot tree she caught the twinkle of a star . . . "It's no use, Beth. The wagon was too rickety and the star too far away" . . . David . . . A bird in the leafy thicket above her head sang plaintively. The fragrance of the honeysuckle was breathlessly sweet. Memories trooped through her head . . .

"What are you thinking?"

"Of the bird in the apricot tree."

"Was it singing, Beth?"

"Such a sad, sad song. Over and over. 'Good-bye, David . . . Good-bye, my David, good-bye'" . . .

She rose suddenly and sped up the garden path, fleeing from memories, running away from heartache. And the song of the bird followed, faint, yet clear, wistfully sad . . . "Good-bye, David. Good-bye, my David, good-bye" . . .

❋ II ❋

"I'm going away, Mother."

"Where?"

"To Hope — in Boston. I can't stay here."

"That might be a good idea . . . When?"

"To-morrow."

"Have you money enough?"

"I think so."

"Let me ask Grandmother."

"I won't take a penny from her."

"You're so bitter, darling."

"I hate her. I'll hate her as long as I live."

Wash drove her in to the station. She did not say good-bye to Grandmother or Aunt Dolly. Aunt Dolly was hurt. She wept a little and talked about ingratitude. Grandmother said nothing. But she sat alone on the back veranda a great deal, staring grimly out over the lawn. She did not destroy the travel pamphlets. She folded them neatly and locked them away in her desk. The child would come to her senses after a while. Uncle Randolph was obviously relieved. He devoted himself, with an unburdened mind, to the campaign and Miss Emilie. His eyes ceased to be furtive. The whistled strains of "Little Annie Rooney" were constantly in the air. Mother was lonely. She bore it with patience. Elizabeth must find an end to unhappiness. That was the only thing that mattered.

She did not find it in Boston. The restlessness persisted. Hope was kind and cheerful, never bored, wanting always to do the thing that might please Elizabeth. They walked for hours through the Common, up and down the hilly streets.

"You keep looking at people, Beth."

"I may find David. Somewhere."

"See that house with the lavender glass in the windows."

"I'm looking for David."

"And the tree growing up through the street."

"He may be here. He may have come to Boston."

She stayed two weeks in Hope's gay little apartment with its peacock chintz, its lacquer and brass, its odd carved animals collected from all quarters of the globe. Afterwards no single detail of the visit was clear in Elizabeth's mind. The people she met were shadows, forgotten as soon as they were gone. Roger, too, was a shadow. He came one evening to call. To Elizabeth he seemed an utter stranger. She resented his presence because it disturbed her thoughts. He brought her a copy of his book. She thanked him but did not open it. Weeks afterward Hope found it under the davenport cushions. The book was dedicated to Elizabeth. It was a long time before she learned of Roger's last tribute to a fallen pedestal.

They went, one day, to Hopewell, an hour's journey from Boston. It was a quiet town with

white spires of churches pricking through the elm trees and neat frame houses set in tidy lawns. Elizabeth's eyes brightened and a tinge of pink crept into her cheeks as they walked along the wide shady streets.

"There's the college, Hope. Father used to teach there."

"It's charming."

"And there's the hill. We had a toboggan painted red."

"You remember, Beth?"

"Perfectly. I loved it all . . . The river, Hope. There it is. Such a lazy little river. Not like the one at home."

"What a queer old house."

"That's our house. That's where we used to live."

"It's boarded up and the yard is waist high with weeds."

"I'm going in."

They explored the yard and the tangled garden. Elizabeth felt a knot gather in her throat.

"Here's the sun dial. Father put it there." She pushed away the vines. "See, it says, 'I only mark the hours that shine.' All the hours were shining then."

"You're a sentimental goose."

"I was happy here. I'm going to buy it some day and raise a family of cats."

"Applesauce!" teased Hope.

"All right. Wait and see."

A sign on the gate referred them to a real estate dealer. They called at his office and Elizabeth asked questions about the house. He told her the owner would be glad to sell it. The place was sadly in need of repair. They might get it rather cheap. He promised to consult the owner and let her know.

The real estate man remembered her father. He called in his wife, a plump smiling woman with cheeks like winter apples. She asked for Elizabeth's mother and recalled things that had happened a very long time ago. She invited them into her house next door, brought out new cider and ginger cookies. Elizabeth glowed. Hope, devouring the ginger cookies, drew a long breath of relief.

Back in Boston Elizabeth was restless again. She found there a letter from Jerry. No news of David. There must be soon. Elizabeth was not to fret. They were certain to find him soon. Jerry was still on the job. The sparkle vanished. The faint tinge of pink faded out of Elizabeth's cheeks. She wandered about as aimlessly as before. Nothing that Hope could suggest appealed to her. She seemed content only when they walked where the crowds were thickest. She slept very little. She ate almost nothing at all.

"You aren't contented here, Beth," Hope said as they sat at breakfast one morning. "Let's go somewhere."

"Where?" Elizabeth asked in a listless voice.

"Somewhere fresh and new. A place you have never seen. Atlantic City. It's gorgeous there in October."

Elizabeth consented, not caring very much, willing to move endlessly on and on. She was very tired, too weary to protest or argue. Hope took matters into her own hands. They went to Atlantic City.

✲ III ✲

"I can't stay here, Hope."

"Why not, Gorgeous?"

"Costs too much."

"Rats! Four dollars a day."

"You're fibbing . . . I heard what the desk clerk said."

"What of it? I have lots of money."

"But Hope, I can't let you —"

"Sure you can. Now hush up and eat your dinner. Every bite or I'll leave you flat."

"You're a sweet thing."

"Oh hush! You make me tired. Get some pink in your cheeks and don't worry."

It was easy, somehow, not to worry at all. Atlantic City seemed an enchanted place, far removed from the world. Nothing was quite real, the enormous hotels, the jutting piers, the gay little boardwalk shops, the lights like chains of colored beads, the sea and the wide clean beach. Elizabeth felt her spirits lift with the first sniff of clean salt

air. The weather was made to order, golden with sunlight, crisped with the chill of autumn. The air sparkled like amber wine. A little of the sparkle crept into Elizabeth's eyes, a faint rose-pink warmed her cheeks. Things acquired some proportion. The waves lulled her to sleep at night. The wind made her hungry. She was able to eat and rest a little.

Lloyd joined them the day after their arrival. He was going South to look for his wings. Very soon now; next week, perhaps. This would be his last vacation with Hope until Christmas. They made good use of the time. Elizabeth seldom accompanied them on their rambling expeditions. Any exertion tired her. She liked being alone. It was pleasant to lie on the sun porch of the hotel, quiet, drowsy, not thinking very much, soothed by the song of the waves. She tried to read but the experiment was not a success. Stray thoughts, slipping unbidden into her mind, became confused with the story. She prefered just to lie still without making an effort of any kind, tranquil, half asleep, blinking up into the shining blue of the clear October sky.

Sometimes she sat on a bench along the boardwalk and watched the people who passed. So many faces; faces of old ladies in rolling chairs, black faces slit in an ivory grin, rosy tanned faces of children, baby faces framed in cap frills. But never the right face. No news from David. Never a trace of Amy Phelps. She could think of it calmly now. The tension relaxed. The walls of glass were shattered. She was drowsy most of the time.

Peaceful days. The hours slipped by like amber beads on a thread of frosted silver. Elizabeth wished she might stay there forever, slowly forgetting the past, heedless of the future, caught in the spell of the sun and the wind and the sea. Her mind grew tranquil. Life no longer seemed a mountain that must be climbed.

And then one day she saw Amy Phelps. It happened suddenly and quite without warning. Elizabeth was leaning against the boardwalk rail, watching with idle interest a ship far out at sea rising and dipping against the horizon line, a tiny toy shop with stacks like stumps of slate pencil, trailing wee feathers of smoke. The ship was bound somewhere, of course. Strange, she thought dreamily, that she no longer felt that restless urge to be moving on and on. Pleasant, too. The sun was like warm clear water. She was drowsy, so wrapped about with tranquility that she scarcely noticed the figure leaning beside her against the rail.

Something snatched her back to consciousness, a whiff of perfume seemed to be mingled with the salty breath of the wind. Cheap perfume, "Fleur de Printemps, one ninety-eight in a ruby flask. Memories, vividly clear, flashed into her mind. Her heart beat with a quick breathless rhythm. She saw again the river park, a flower-wreathed hat, a bobbing red balloon. She turned quickly, drowsiness gone, her heart throbbing in her throat. There was Amy Phelps, decked out in cheap finery, rouged and

plump, gazing at her intently from under the brim of a bright blue hat. For a moment they stared at each other without speaking, both startled, wondering, embarrassed. Amy was the first to recover.

"It is Miss Lloyd, isn't it?" She smiled brightly. "You remember me?"

"Yes . . . Of course." Elizabeth wondered if that thin little squeak of sound could be her own voice.

"I never knew you very well. But it's nice to see someone from home." Amy had apparently lost all feeling of embarrassment. Her voice was honey-sweet. Her round blue eyes, widened in childish surprise, were bland and innocent. "I suppose there was lots of talk when Dave and I left that way. People always think the worst when a girl elopes."

"Are you — living here?" Elizabeth's throat was dry. Her lips felt queer and stiff.

"Just down for the day." Amy opened a vanity case and airily powdered her nose.

"Is — is David here?"

"No," Amy answered guardedly. "He travels."

"Then he isn't going back with the bridge company?"

"No." Amy touched up her pouting lips. "He's in a new line of work."

"That's too bad." Elizabeth gripped the rail desperately. "David liked to build bridges. Even when he was a child."

"He's doin' fine." Amy closed the vanity case and tucked it into her bag. Elizabeth wondered if she imagined that the fingers in the soiled white gloves were trembling a little. "Dave's smart. He'll get along at anything."

"Is he — well?"

"Fine. Looks better than he has for a long time."

Elizabeth felt things whirling about . . . If the girl would take off her glove. The left one . . .

"Where do you — live?" she asked faintly.

"All over. Wherever it's most convenient."

"Are you and David — " Elizabeth faltered. The rest of the sentence caught in her throat.

Amy consciously lowered her lashes. A shy smile curved her full red lips.

"I hope you're not mad at me. About what happened." Her fingers twisted the chain of the huge bead bag. "If you knew how wonderful it seems to me. But you couldn't know. You've always had everything . . . It's like a dream. I — I've always loved Dave and I never supposed he'd look at me. I wished on the stars . . . The first star every night . . . Crazy?"

"I — I hope you will be happy."

"Thanks . . . There's my girl friend waitin' . . . Glad I saw you. I'll tell Dave you're lookin' fine. You can break the news if you want. Dave won't mind now. Tell the old home town I'm well and decent and walkin' on air."

A pouting smile, a flip of her pleated skirt, and Amy was gone, walking off down the boardwalk with a girl in a cherry-red hat, leaving behind her a hope that had perished, a lingering whiff of her favorite perfume.

Elizabeth stood quite still, her hands gripping the rail for support, her eyes fixed in a blank trance like stare upon the sea. The question was answered. David was safe . . . David and Amy Phelps . . . There was something else that she might have done. What? She couldn't think. Her head felt dull and empty . . .

David and Amy Phelps . . . The journey was ended. No use any longer to search and wander and scan the passing faces. David had done a thorough job. He had put himself out of her reach. She must go back home. The spell was broken. Never again would this be an enchanted place. It was spoiled by a whiff of perfume. She smelled it all about her. In the air, in the sun, in the wind. She would smell it always as long as she lived . . .

Strength and feeling returned and with them a measure of peace . . . She must go back home. For David's sake she must try to be tranquil and sane, try to find the happiness he had bought for her at the price of his own . . . David . . . The sunshine had lost its warmth. A shadow fell across the sparkling sea . . . "David! David! Come back! I am lost without you, my dear" . . . All the long to-morrows . . . Would she ever be happy

again? . . . Zeke's words trailed through her mind . . . "Yesterday's sun done set. Las' year's rain am dry. Better let old sorrows sleep and think ob what's comin' to-morrow" . . . Would she ever feel that way? Sometimes . . . Perhaps . . .

She turned and walked slowly back toward the hotel.

Chapter Seventeen

I

JERRY threw a fresh log on the fire and settled back in his chair. The low wide room was dim with shadows. There was no light save the fitful gleam of the fire. Outside a storm was raging. The wind prowled around the tumbling old house, roared down the chimney, shook the casements until they rattled. Rain, sharp showers of hail lashed against the window. Rags, a shaggy black ball on the hearth, lifted his head and whined.

Jerry stooped to soothe him.

"There, old fellow, it's only wind. You and me — we're snug as two bugs in a rug. Nothin' to whine about . . . Hear the old sycamore! Wailin' like a Banshee. Reckon this storm will just about do for it. I'd ought to have cut it down. Couldn't somehow. It's like an old friend. Hark to it rappin' against the window! Want's to get in where it's warm . . . There was a storm before Davie left. Not bad like this. Remember he came in soakin' wet? White as a ghost. I'd ought to have known he was bothered . . . Wonder where he is? Lonesome without him, ain't it, old man? Worse'n when he was off at college. Seems as though he might somehow send us a message . . . The old

fiddle, it's lonesome too. See there. The dust is thick on the bow. No heart for tunes anymore . . .

Remember how he liked "Missour Gal"? Said it made him feel good. Little chap then. Fourteen or so. You was a pup. Blamed if you ain't near about an old man now . . . Lady's gettin' old too. I'll have to put her to pasture. And me, I'm gettin' along . . . Nothin' young around here now, except when Elizabeth comes. Spunky, ain't she? Beats all get out for grit . . . She thinks Davie married the Phelps girl. Maybe. Durned young fool! . . . There now old fellow. It's only the wind. Rarin' strong, ain't she, Rags? . . . Know how you got that name? . . . Davie gave it to you. He found you in a rag bag near about starved to death. Fed you milk out of a baby's bottle an' you slept on his bed every night . . . Queer little chap. Always askin' the durndest questions . . . Lonely, old man? . . . So'm I . . . Come on up here in the chair" . . .

Rags promptly accepted the invitation. He sprang into the chair, snuggled against Jerry with a little whimper of relief. Silently the old man and the shaggy black dog sat before the fire, watching the sparks fly up the chimney, warm and safe from the storm outside. The rain pelted against the windows. The rattle of hail was like the charge of midget artillery. Shadows trooped across the ceiling, eerie shadows, restless ghosts of memory. The assorted clocks ticked together, a muted sym-

phony, dulled by the roar of the storm. And ever through the creaking of doors, the rattle of shutters and sash, shrilled the Banshee wail of the old sycamore. A fearful night. Rags shivered and buried his head.

Jerry, more gnome-like than ever hunched in the arm chair beside the fire, smoked thoughtfully. For him, the room was filled with memories of David. He saw on the empty hearth a small sturdy boy reading by the firelight . . .

"Time for bed, Davie me lad."

"Oh Jerry, not yet! Just one more chapter."

"What's that you're readin'?"

"David Copperfield. Gosh Jerry, he had a tough time, too" . . .

Grave blue eyes, a chin thrust gallantly forward. Davie was never a child. He had always been a grave boy. Always that quiet direct way about him. He'd almost never laughed but when he was pleased his face would light up with a smile like sunshine. A sturdy determined little boy . . .

"You can't carry that, son."

"Sure I can. Easy as anything."

"Better lay off for a minute."

"I'm not tired. Honest, Jerry. Just feel how much muscle I got" . . .

He saw him studying at the old walnut table over there, his elbows propped on an opened book, his chin in the cupped palms of his hands, a worried frown creasing his brow under the tousled locks of curly dark hair . . .

"Struck a snag, Davie me lad?"

"I can't remember dates."

"They're pesky things, son."

"Battles and things, they're easy. But dates! Guess I must have holes in my head."

A procession of shadowy Davids filed across the hearth: David in his first long trousers, his voice uncertain, a silky fuzz on his chin; David in football togs, muddy and tired and victorious; David coming home from college for vacations, his face lighted by one of his rare slow smiles, the grip of his hand like steel . . .

"Well Jerry, here I am!"

"Durned if you ain't, Davie me lad."

"Gee, I'm glad to see you."

"Everything all right?"

"Great! But I'm starved to death. What about chicken pie with dumplings and bacon across the top? Nobody can make it like you."

"Oh, get out of my way and take this truck upstairs" . . .

David graduating while Jerry in a new suit and a stiff white collar that chafed his neck sat among the mothers and fathers, scowling, fidgeting, almost bursting with pride. David strutting with importance over his first job, helping to build the Winchester bridge. Then David and Elizabeth, sitting in front of the fire while Jerry played the fiddle, eating his pot-pie with dumplings and bacon across the top, bringing the brightness of youth, like sunlight

and Spring and the singing of meadow larks, to the dim old house. Elizabeth, slim as a silver birch, with her tawny bright hair and her golden eyes, brave and young and beautiful; David, sturdy and grave, with the quiet direct way about him and his rare warm smile. He saw them sitting in the hammock under the crab-apple trees, smiling, happy to be together, never forgetting a cranky old man. Jerry's children, dearer to him than anything else in the world. David and Elizabeth. Now they were unhappy. And he was unable to help them. There was nothing he could do.

Jerry's pipe went out. He did not light it again. His eyes brooded into the fire. No laughing twinkles in them now. They were grim and resentful. He thought of Grandmother Lloyd, tiny, elegant, sparkling with jewels; of Uncle Randolph with a flower in his coat lapel, pompous, bland, no better than he ought to be; of Aunt Julia, apeing her mother as best she could, holding her chin in the air. It was their fault that David was gone, that Elizabeth wore a sad sweet look in her golden eyes, that dust lay thick on the fiddle bow. Damn them all, the whole stiff necked lot of them. If they might be made to suffer. No chance, not a single chance in the world. They might wreck the lives of his children. What of that? The Queen can do not wrong. Jerry's teeth ground the pipe stem in helpless rage.

The log on the andiron broke with a sputter of flying sparks. The red embers burned into flaky

gray ash. The room grew cool. Jerry did not stir from his chair. He was absorbed in his favorite game. A grim sort of game it was and Jerry had never won. Nor did it seem probable that he would ever be able to form a picture with the jumbled fragments stored away in his head. He had collected them slowly with painstaking care, the jumbled irregular fragments which somehow would not fit together. Elizabeth had given him the most important ones. Miss Phoebe had added a few. Old Jake Fowler, monstrously fat, who used to run the hotel and pool room, had contributed some. Others from Mame Garrity, a former Shantytown belle, from crippled Johnny Wells who tended the railroad crossing now but had once been a famous jocky. A headful of fragments. But none of them would do. He was almost sure of the connection between Uncle Randolph and David's father. He had constructed a plausible story, part suspicion, part founded on fact and backed by substantial proof. But something was missing. The fragments would not fit together. There was, after all, nothing that he could do. Jerry's brows met in a puzzled frown. His eyes brooding into the fire were grim and baffled and quite without hope.

The grandfather's clock struck nine. The Dresden clock with its gilt cupids and wreath of forget-me-nots tinkled a gay response. The cuckoo popped its yellow head out of the carved Swiss door. All the others joined in the chiming. The room was

filled with falling notes, deep, tinkling, jangling, mellow. And suddenly, above them all, like the roar of a mighty cataract drowning the song of a mountain rill, a thundering, splintering, echoing crash. The old house seemed to tremble. A shower of splintered glass rained in on the floor; a swirl of copper-green leaves filled the gaping frames of the windows. A gigantic sigh, like sucking waves, and then a strange long silence.

"It's the old sycamore, Rags!" Jerry sprang from his chair. "Poor old fellow. He's tottered and tumbled at last."

He lit a lantern hanging on a hook beside the fireplace and proceeded to investigate. The side windows were broken and choked with leaves. The old tree had done its best to get inside to the fire.

"If the wall hadn't been made of solid stone, old fellow, he'd have crashed clear through. Reckon we'd better find out what's happened upstairs."

Jerry, with Rags at his heels, climbed the narrow stair case.

"Davie's room'll be worst. Come on, old fellow, let's see what's happened in there."

The side windows in David's room, corresponding to the windows in the room below, were crushed and splintered. Under one of them stood a low flat-topped desk. A limb of the tree had fallen across it, tearing away as it crashed, the casement and a section of the wall. Clinging wet leaves, bits of mortar and fragments of glass covered the desk.

Jerry, holding the lantern, poked about in the wreckage to see if anything of value had been destroyed. Presently he drew out a crushed and battered object. It was the chest from South America, the box made of polished wood that smelled like spices, its carving demolished, its pattern of shell flowers hopelessly ruined.

"I'd rather it had been anything else," Jerry mourned. "Davie thought a heap of this."

He set the lantern on the table and bent to examine the chest. It was crushed like an egg shell. When he lifted the lid, it hung from a broken hinge. Inside were the queer little keepsakes which David had cherished, the clippings, the letters, the tin-type, the tarnished small birthday-cake ring. With gentle fingers Jerry smoothed the fluted silk lining. He felt the crinkle of paper. Something had been hidden between the lining and the lid. He removed the splinters and pulled out an envelope bearing in bold swooping letters the single name — Margaret.

The envelope was sealed and further secured with a blob of wax which never had been broken. The paper was yellowed with age and the ink had faded to a faint brown tinge. Jerry was conscious of a strange excitement . . . Margaret . . . That was the name of David's mother and David's father had made the chest. Jerry pulled a chair close to the table. He was trembling with eagerness. His fingers, so clever with clock springs and the most delicate of tools, made sad work of opening the en-

velope. At last it was accomplished and the pages inside were smoothed out on the table. The writing was clear and distinct, though the ink had faded to rust color. Jerry had no difficulty in reading it. The words marching across the pages were written with swoops and flourishes. There were curly tails to the "y"s.

As he read, the excitement died out of Jerry's eyes and his shoulders drooped. When he had finished, he sat very still for a moment, gazing thoughtfully at the yellow pages. All at once his face brightened and a militant glare shone in his mild gray eyes. He folded the letter into his wallet, secured it with a rubber band. Then he picked up the lantern and addressed himself to the shaggy small dog.

"Step lively, old fellow. It's rainin' Nanny goats and I'll be stiff with aches by to-morrow. But come along, Rags, old man. You and I — we've got us a chore that won't wait for the sun."

His shoulders stiffened. His brows bristled fiercely. He marched with a military stride, through the hallway, down the dim narrow stairs. In his ears was a blowing of trumpts. Jerry had found his chance.

❋ II ❋

Elizabeth sat curled up in a chair by the library fire, her hands linked loosely in her lap, her head drooping against the dull upholstery. In the stately

old room there was warmth and light, ruddy glow of the flames, pools of topaz and ruby and amber spilled by the shaded lamps. The mulberry window drapes had been drawn to shut out the storm. Grandmother was playing solitaire. The rosewood card table was open across her knees and the cards fell into place with a repeated soft flapping sound, monotonous and drowsy. Occasionally she glanced over at Elizabeth, still and white in the high-backed chair, and an expression of annoyance twisted her brows. But she did not speak. Grandmother still felt herself to be as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove. She turned the cards, apparently absorbed in the game, and the firelight drew tiny sparkles from the rings on her small veined hands.

In the music room Hope was singing to Lloyd, her husky sweet voice soft as a whisper above the low accompaniment.

"'Des a nappin', honey
Listenin' to de rain,
Des a tappin', soft like,
'Gainst de winder pane."

The music, the rain, the soft flap flap of the falling cards wove themselves into a plaintive refrain. Shadowy thoughts trailed through Elizabeth's head. She wondered where David was in all this tumult of rain and wind and storm. If she could know that he was happy! Happy without her, David who had loved her so, who wherever he was,

would love her as long as he lived? . . . Happy? . . . He had never been happy. Why? Who decided such things? Was it luck, or fate, or God? Why should David have been made to suffer for the thing his father had done, for the pride of a tiny old lady with jeweled pins in her hair? . . . Why? . . . Did anyone know? . . .

"Pitty, patty, tappin'
Lonesome sound I know.
'Des a waitin', honey,
Fo' de night to go" . . .

All the long nights. Thinking of David. Longing to feel again the comforting touch of his arms folded closely around her . . . Never to see him again, his deep blue eyes, his slanting smile, the forward thrust of his chin . . . Thinking . . . She must be tranquil for David's sake or what was the use of it all? . . . If she could go away, far away from Winchester. Away from Grandmother's gloating, from constant reminders of David . . . That was impossible. She was helpless . . . A lump gathered in her throat; her eyes, intent upon the fire, were blurred with tears.

The clock on the landing struck ten. Mingled with its deep chiming notes came the brassy clang of the knocker rapping against the door. Elizabeth roused. Who could be coming so late through the storm, clanging the knocker with short, impatient raps? She listened intently. Zeke's meas-

ured footsteps shuffled down the hall. The door opened, closed. She heard voices. Zeke's voice, another voice, blurred and indistinct. Someone to see Uncle Randolph. The footsteps moved toward his study beyond the drawing room on the other side of the hall. She wondered about it for a moment, dismissed the incident, slipped back into thought.

If only she might go away and never come back. She was restless here. Each day was a mountain that must be climbed . . . She had tried to be tranquil . . . Nothing helped very much, the "News" office, Hope, Lloyd . . . All of life before her . . .

"'Des a' nappin', honey,
Listenin' to de rain.
Waitin' fo' de summons
Down de Good-bye lane" . . .

It was quiet in Hopewell. The queer friendly old house, the tangled garden, Father's sun dial smothered in vines. Perhaps there the hours would shine again . . . She might be tranquil, she and Mother alone . . . She might be able to forget . . . Not here, ever . . . David, oh David, come back. I'm lost without you, my dear . . .

A step, a voice from the doorway scattered the brooding fancies. She glanced up. Uncle Randolph stood there between the mulberry drapes, his face white and stricken, his hands trembling against the folds of velvet.

"Mother," he said in a queer strained voice. "Mother — "

"What is it, Randolph?" Grandmother continued to turn the cards.

"Will you come here, please."

"What for?"

"There's someone who wants to see you."

"Who?"

"A man."

"Tell him I have retired." Grandmother laid a red Queen on a black King. "Don't bother me now. I think it's coming out this time."

"It's important, Mother. I think you had better come." There was terror in Uncle Randolph's voice. Elizabeth's heart leaped into her throat. She had seen Uncle Randolph look a little like that before. Grandmother pushed aside the rosewood table.

"This is a late hour for visitors," she said and moved toward the door. "Gracious Randolph, you look really ill."

"Elizabeth."

"Yes, Uncle Randolph."

"Will you please — come, too?"

Wondering, bewildered, her heart pounding frantically, she followed them out of the library, across the hall, into Uncle Randolph's study. Jerry was there, sitting on the edge of a chair, his oilskin coat dripping puddles on the rug, his eyes peering out from under the brim of an oilskin hat. Rags

crouched on the floor at his feet, a shaggy wet ball, shivering, terrified. Elizabeth thought that she must be dreaming.

"Jerry!"

"Good evening, Elizabeth. I reckon likely this is a sort of surprise."

"Jerry," she faltered. "What is it? What's happened? Why are you here?"

"You wish to see me?" asked Grandmother, all jewels and silver lace and frosty blue eyes.

"Well, yes Ma'am," Jerry rose and ducked his head. He had apparently forgotten the oilskin hat. "It's a matter of business. I though you'd be interested, Ma'am."

"I have no business with you." The words were like icicles falling into the warmth of the room.

"That's as may be." Jerry manner was confident and assured. There was an air of bravado about him, a devil-may-care tilt to the oilskin hat. "You' better sit down, Ma'am. It's likely to take us some time."

"Nothing you say can interest me." Grandmother wore her haughtiest expression. She turned to leave the room.

"I ain't so sure about that, Ma'am. Seems like you're mistaken there."

"Mother — Wait just a minute." Uncle Randolph seemed to shrink inside his linen and broadcloth. "I think — I'm afraid it's important."

Grandmother's face stiffened into an ivory

mask. She seated herself in the chair Uncle Randolph pushed forward, sat very erect, her hands impassively folded.

"Come here, Elizabeth," Jerry patted the arm of his chair. "Come sit here by Jerry, my dear."

Nothing was real. The room seemed a swimming sea of colors. She was swimming, too, swimming across waves of carpet patterned in russet and green, swimming without conscious effort to the haven of Jerry's chair. His hand caught hers in a warm comforting clasp. Rags lifted his head and whined. The wind in the oaks and the poplars was like the swishing of mighty waves. As though from a far distance she heard Jerry's voice, steady, confident, tinged ever so faintly with amusement.

"An old friend of mine did me a favor tonight," Jerry began.

"Your friends are not a subject of interest to me," said Grandmother crisply.

"Mother — We'd better," Uncle Randolph sagged into the chair behind his desk. "I think it is — important."

"A very special favor," Jerry continued as though he had not been interrupted. "Though he died to do it, poor old chap. You mind what the Bible say, Ma'am," Jerry ignored Uncle Randolph and directed his remarks to Grandmother, "Greater love hath no man — "

"I am familiar with the quotation," snapped the little old lady, forbidding and icy and calm in the

chair of wine-red leather. "If you've anything to say, will you please make a start."

Jerry had obviously decided on a method of procedure and was not to be side-tracked. He drew a long breath. Elizabeth felt the grip of his hand tighten as he continued in a pleasant, conversational tone:

"I've nothin' to say for Dan Warren. He was an out and out scamp, like as not. But his son's been a son to me and dear as the sight of my eye. For Davie's sake and the sake of Elizabeth here, I'm bound to ask you," he turned for the first time to Uncle Randolph, "if you'll tell your Mother what happened that time at the bank."

"It's a lie!" thundered Uncle Randolph. "I know nothing whatever about it."

Elizabeth trembled with excitement. Her eyes darted from Uncle Randolph's stricken face to the ivory mask that was Grandmother, caught in her cold blue eyes a flicker of apprehension. She was steady now, alert, every nerve at attention.

"You want I should tell her myself?" Jerry watched Uncle Randolph with the fixed intensity of a hawk about to swoop on his victim. "You want I should tell her a story?"

"There's nothing to tell." Uncle Randolph's voice belied the truth of his words. "I tell you, there's nothing at all."

"Go on," said Grandmother quietly.

"Well," Jerry said, "seems like, Ma'am, as

though your son and Davie's father was pretty good friends one time. That's reasonable, ain't it? Both of 'em was young and cocky and feelin' their oats, as the sayin' goes. Now mind you I never saw Dan Warren. 'Twas some time after he left that I rolled into town. But there's plenty of folks as remember him well. Mame Garrity, for instance, old Jake Fowler and Johnny Wells as used to ride the horses at Havre de Grace. You and Dan was friends with them all."

Uncle Randolph seemed about to interrupt. Grandmother silenced him with a gesture.

"Go on, if you please," she said.

"Well," Jerry continued," it seems, Ma'am, when your son worked a while in the bank, he and Dan Warren was thicker than thieves, not meanin' any disrespect by that. They'd, maybe, stop in at Jake Fowler's for a game of pool or a hand of poker and, maybe, a drop of somethin' for the sake of their stummicks, which there's no harm in as ever I saw. And evenin's they'd maybe wander over into Shantytown for a bit of a talk with Mame Garrity as was a charmer once, so I'm told, which was all right for your son, Ma'am, who was free to do as he pleased. Dan Warren had a wife, but that's no matter of mine. Mame, so they say, had a witchin' way with her eyes. And they shot ducks together which is a healthy way of spendin' the time. And, maybe, every so often, they'd run down to Havre de Grace for the races. There's somethin' about horses

as gets in your blood, Ma'am. Hoofs poundin', the jockeys' colors, crowds, excitement, and maybe a fortune to be won as quick as the crack of a whip.

"And maybe they'd win and maybe they'd lose. But money from the races is only lent money, Ma'am. Sooner or later you're bound to lose it again. But it gets in your blood, Ma'am, till you just can't let it alone. And maybe they borrowed from the bank, on the quiet you understand. Maybe they borrowed a pile to bet on 'Kentucky Belle' which was a favorite to win in the winter meet of nineteen hundred and one, swift as a breeze, but had the misfortune to stumble and break her leg, so Johnny Wells told me, Ma'am, and he ought to know since 'twas in that same stumble the poor chap broke his back.

"And maybe they'd no way to pay back the money. Both of 'em was in deep together but seemed as though one was enough to take the blame. So maybe they spun a coin or maybe they cut the cards. Anyway Dan Warren lost and the blame was all laid to him. Seems as though he went to South America, and, I don't doubt, repented his sins. And maybe he worried about his wife and the baby son he'd been obliged to leave behind. Wouldn't it be reasonable, Ma'am, if he'd write and ask his old friend to look after them so they'd not come to want? Maybe the old friend hid that letter and a long time later came across it again. Maybe he tore it up and burned it somewhere in a stove. And

likely as not it didn't all burn. Ain't it possible that's what Elizabeth found as startled her Uncle so much? Maybe, that's all I say. But seems reasonable, don't it, Ma'am?"

Jerry paused. A strained silence filled the room, a long tense silence broken only by the roar and rush of the storm. Uncle Randolph seemed incapable of speech. His fingers twisted an ivory paper-cutter. Presently it broke with a snap. The sound appeared to rouse Grandmother.

"Is this true, Randolph?" she asked frigidly.

"He can't prove it." The words appeared to give him confidence. "No. No. It's all a damned lie."

"That's how 'twould seem to me," Jerry said mildly, "when I'd mull it all through in my head. A hundred times I've given it up as a crazy notion of mine. But my old friend was bound I should know." He fumbled into his inside pocket, drew out his wallet and slipped off the band of elastic. "To-night the old sycamore fell and crashed through the windows. It smashed a box on Davie's desk. 'Twas a box his Father had made and sent back home to his wife." Jerry opened the envelope and unfolded the sheets of yellowed paper. "This is a letter Dan Warren wrote to his wife just before he died. It's proof enough, I should reckon."

Uncle Randolph started up from his chair.

"They won't believe you. Nobody would believe a word that you say."

"Hush!" said Grandmother sternly and Uncle Randolph dropped back in his chair. Elizabeth watched him intently. No need to ask if it were true. The pink carnation in his coat lapel was crisp and jaunty. Everything else about him was limp and whining and licked.

"I'm not so sure," Jerry continued. "People, as a general rule, believe what they want. And seems as though they've got to be real particular about who they send to congress. It's easy enough to prove that this is Dan Warren's writing. There's evidence at the bank. Maybe, if you'd take a look, you'd recognize it yourself."

Jerry, a grotesque and somehow heroic figure, walked over to the desk. "Does it look familiar at all? . . . Oh no, I'll keep it myself," he added as Uncle Randolph made a quick snatch at the paper. "This here's the last will and testament of my friend the old sycamore tree."

Elizabeth struggled against a wild desire to laugh. Jerry, dear Jerry, Jerry the junk man with his bristling brows and his funny red beard, he had the upper hand now. They were afraid of him. Grandmother and Uncle Randolph. He had it in his power to bring the house of the royal family crashing about their ears. Elizabeth tried to feel some satisfaction in this humbling of Grandmother's pride. Poor little tyrant. She was only an old, old lady with the shadow of fear in her eyes. And Uncle Randolph was a whining small boy clinging to

his Mother's skirt. Pity stirred in her heart. She banished it sternly. Why should she care about them? They had felt no pity for her. Grandmother was speaking.

"And what," she asked, "do you propose to do about this?"

"How much will you take?" Uncle Randolph's voice was hoarse and eager. "How much will you take for that?"

Jerry was silent for a moment. He stood quite still in the center of the floor, holding in his hand Dan Warren's last message to the wife he had left behind.

"Davie's gone," he said slowly. "I don't want anything for myself. Revenge ain't so much after all. 'Twon't bring David back or blow the dust off my fiddle bow. It shall be as Elizabeth says." He turned to her and Elizabeth saw, for the first time since David had gone away, the dancing twinkles in his mild blue eyes. "I'll just let her set the price."

"You know what I want, Grandmother," Elizabeth said clearly. "The house in Hopewell for Mother and me."

"I'll see about it." Her tired old eyes moved on to Jerry. "Will that be satisfactory?"

"It's just as Elizabeth says."

"You'll give me that letter?" asked Uncle Randolph.

"I'll burn it in sight of you all."

"You'll do it, Mother? You won't let anyone know?"

Grandmother straightened her shoulders beneath the frail silver web of her gown.

"There's never been a scandal in my family," she said with a scornful glance at her eldest son. "I'll do as Elizabeth wants."

"Thank you, Grandmother. I'm sorry." Elizabeth's lips quivered. "It's dreadful that people must hurt each other. I am sorry. But don't you see — there wasn't any other way."

"If you'll come back to-morrow," Grandmother said quietly, "I'll have everything arranged."

"You can come to me." Jerry allowed himself this last victorious gesture. "I'll be home about noon. It's the house with the crazy wall."

"How do I know what you'll do?" Relief had revived Uncle Randolph's courage. "Between now and to-morrow, how do I know whom you'll tell?"

Again Jerry directed his remarks to Grandmother.

"I give you my word, Ma'am. And to-morrow we'll burn the letter. After that you'll be safe. Who's to believe a shabby old junk man against his honor, the congressman-elect? . . . Will you walk with me to the door, Beth?" He gallantly crooked his arm. "I wish you good-night, one and all."

Once again Jerry and Elizabeth marched out of the royal presence, arm in arm, accompanied by banners and the martial beating of drums. Rags

caught the victorious spirit. Head up, ears erect, he followed them, his stump of a tail proudly waving.

❋ III ❋

"It's raining so, Jerry. However will you get home?"

"I came in Davie's car. It's parked around at the side."

"Then go out this way. It's closer."

She led him down a narrow hall into a small enclosed section of the back veranda, fragrant with blossoming plants and the smell of rich moist earth.

"I'm going to decorate you, Jerry," Elizabeth said. "Dear, dear Jerry. You're a very brave soldier, indeed."

She turned on a light in a dull shade, glanced at the tiers of potted plants. "It must be something very gay for a brave old soldier like you."

Her eyes travelled over the wax plants and mignonette, the clumps of verbena and fuchsias and fern, caught the gay rose-pink of a young geranium bud. Smiling a little, she broke the stem and fastened it against his coat.

"There, old soldier," she said. "Here's how they do it in France."

She rested her hands on his shoulders. Her lips, light as the touch of a butterfly's wing, brushed first his left cheek and then his right.

"Go along with you," said Jerry crossly, very embarrassed and very much pleased. "It's time I was home in bed."

"And Rags is a soldier, too." She bent to caress his shaggy black head.

"And you're the best soldier of all," Jerry added blowing his nose a terrific blast.

"The three musketeers," Elizabeth laughed tremulously. "I'll miss you, Jerry. But I'm glad I am going away . . . Would you mind — May I read the letter?"

He handed it to her silently. She opened the folded sheets, read them slowly, standing so that the light fell upon her tawny bright hair. When she had finished, she looked at Jerry with a bewildered expression in her eyes.

"This is a love letter, Jerry. There's nothing in it. None of the things that you said."

Jerry's face broke into myriads of laughing lines.

"Part of a soldier's trade, my dear," he said with a chuckle of deep enjoyment, "is to take the enemy off his guard and throw a durned good bluff."

Elizabeth understood. A bit of the old sparkle, a gleam of April sunshine, crept into her face.

"Jerry! You outrageous old darling!" She flung her arms around his neck. "You funny sweet precious old thing!"

"All old folks, Beth," Jerry said huskily. "An old man, an old dog . . . an old tree."

Chapter Eighteen

❋ I ❋

"I CAN'T believe it." Mother's eyes were shining. "I can't believe that it's true."

"But it is," Elizabeth smiled wanly. "Here's the check and the bank is to send us an allowance four times a year."

"Whatever happened to her?" Mother folded a filmy frock into the yawning trunk. "What on earth made her change her mind?"

"I guess she's tired of us both." Elizabeth was half-buried in the wardrobe. Mother could not see the mischievous smile that quirked her lips. "Don't blame her, do you?"

"I don't think she's well," mused Mother. "She stays in her room so much. And she had nothing to say about Uncle Randolph's election. I thought she would be delighted."

"Grandmother is an old, old lady." Elizabeth emerged from the wardrobe with an armload of frocks. There was no trace of the mischievous smile. "Perhaps she's just finding that out."

"She'll be alone here when Uncle Randolph is married. No one but Dolly and the servants. I'm afraid she'll be very lonely."

"Serves her right," Elizabeth said sharply. "It serves her entirely right."

"Don't be too harsh, darling," said Mother in gentle reproof. "Think what she's giving us."

"Even that can't make up," Elizabeth said slowly, "for sending David away."

"I'm sorry," Mother's voice faltered. "I was fond of him too."

There was silence for an interval in the room with the great carved bed and the daisy-wreathes on the walls. Mother folded the frocks into the trunk with hands that trembled a little. Elizabeth gazed off through the window at the bare branches of the poplars gilded with yellow sunshine. After to-day she might never see them again. A feeling of mingled pain and relief stirred in her heart. She was leaving the past behind her, David, the things that both of them had loved. Teardrops jeweled her lashes. She sighed, a long wistful sigh.

"We'll be in Boston to-morrow." Mother's voice broke the silence, a happy voice, trilling with anticipation.

"Yes darling." Elizabeth turned from the window. "Wash will drive us to the junction and we'll get the sleeper at Philadelphia."

"And be in Hopewell by noon! I haven't seen it for — Gracious it's nearly twelve years! Did it look just the same?"

"Just the same," Elizabeth answered. "Except that it's smothered in weeds."

"Did my rambler grow?"

"It has covered one side of the house."

"And the sun-dial?"

"Yes Darling . . . It's still marking the hours that shine."

"And the furniture?"

"I guess it's all there. But it's apt to be pretty shabby."

"We'll make covers and curtains. And paint the woodwork, and clean and mend and rake."

"I'll do all that. Remember, young lady," Elizabeth issued an impressive warning. "You're to take care of yourself."

"But I feel so much better. And there, I'll never be ill again. With a house of our own and a right to do as we please! You'll see, Betty-Bonnet, I'll never be ill again."

"You haven't called me that for a long, long time," Elizabeth said softly. "That was Father's name."

"It's because we are going back home." Mother's eyes brimmed with happy tears. "I wish somehow he might know."

"Perhaps he does . . . But we've no time to waste like this. The expressman is coming for the trunks. Step lively, darling."

Mother wiped away the tears and returned to her packing.

"I don't know where we'll ever put all these things," she said with a hopeless sigh. "Miss Phoebe's preserves and the cuttings and flower seeds."

"In that box by the window. I'll pack them myself . . . Not that box, darling. That's my typewriter. You should have heard Sam Perry's presentation speech. And Pete, the press-boy, sniffled. I'll use it too, bless them! Brenda Lee read a farewell poem . . . Do you suppose I can write stories, Mother?"

"Of course you can. And the 'News' will claim all the credit . . . What's in this bag?"

"Seeds from Miss Phoebe's pumpkins. I'll plant them beside the back porch."

"Gracious! Are we going to start a farm?"

"I wanted them, Mother." Elizabeth's lips trembled. "Do you mind very much?"

"Mind!" Mother's cheeks were as pink as the fluff of chiffon on her arm. "You can grow turnips in the parlor, if you want to, Betty-Bonnet."

"Jerry gave me his melodion. And the brocade sofa and two of the clocks. They have already been shipped. And he's promised to come for Christmas."

"That's nice. Jerry has been very kind."

"You'll never know, Mother —" Again the mischievous smile quirked Elizabeth's lips. "You'll never know just how kind Jerry has been."

"All these jars of jelly!" Mother surveyed Miss Phoebe's farewell offering. "There's tissue paper in the hall closet. I'll get it and start in with them." She set off at a quick little trot, happy and pleased and important because they were going back home.

Elizabeth dropped into a chintz-covered chair beside the window, looked out across the broad sloping lawns. They were growing brown. Winter was coming. Strange to think that it had been less than a year since she had come to live at "The Poplars," radiant, sure of herself, just back from a trip abroad with Roger's ring on her hand. Less than a year since David had found her half buried in snow on Laurel Hill, since he had carried her down through the wintry twilight to the brocade sofa beside Jerry's fire. Less than a year. It seemed an eternity. So many things had happened, things that were sad and distressing, lovely things that she would remember as long as she lived. She was older now, not very sure about anything. The tawny-haired little girl was gone. She could never come to life again. That seemed a shame. She'd been a nice sort of child. And the gypsy Elizabeth too was gone, gone with David, tramping a shadowy trail, watching the sun rise over the mountains, camping out under the stars. Only David had known and loved her . . . A lump swelled in Elizabeth's throat. Her heart felt twisted with pain.

One good thing had emerged from this muddle of everybody's life. She liked to think about that. Hope and Lloyd were married. It happened the night before Lloyd went south to look for his wings. They drove down into Maryland, the three of them close together in Aunt Julia's borrowed sedan. And there they were married by a minister in a dressing

gown with striped pajamas showing out underneath. No witnesses except Elizabeth and the minister's wife in curl papers and a flannelette wrapper. No bridesmaids in airy tulle, no flowers, no pealing of organs and showers of rose-leaf confetti. But Hope had not seemed to mind. Her gamin grin softened into a tremulous smile. There was in her pansy dark eyes a shy sweet shine. And Lloyd! He swaggered, he strutted, he crowed. Lloyd would fight an eagle now to snatch the wings he had lost.

They left the next morning. The acquisition of a Salem Embree, though it was not the one they'd expected, had tempered the family wrath. Uncle James walked with a sprightlier step. Lucile was delighted. Aunt Julia found frequent excuses to speak of her absent son, of her new daughter-in-law, the former Miss Embree from Salem. Yes, from the pain and the sadness, one fine sweet thing had emerged. Elizabeth could be glad, very glad about that.

No one knew what Grandmother thought. She seldom talked to anyone except faithful old Zeke who remembered things that had happened a very long time ago. Since the morning at Jerry's when the letter from South America had been burned and the final arrangements made, she had never directed a remark to Elizabeth or Uncle Randolph. The carriage remained in the stable; the horses were sent back to the farm. Grandmother seemed to have lost her passion for pageantry. Sometimes

she walked in the garden or under the poplars up and down the drive. For hours together she sat in her own room, gazing out through the windows at the withering, frost-whitened lawn. Once Elizabeth saw her standing before a portrait of Father painted when he was a child. She had looked, at that moment, very old and lonely and sad. Elizabeth stifled the pity that then had stirred in her heart. Grandmother had driven David away. She would hate her as long as she lived.

And now they were going to Hopewell. Thanks to Jerry, gallant old soldier, they were to have a home of their own . . . Elizabeth rested her cheek on her hand and idly watched a sparrow hopping through the branches of a gaunt old poplar . . . There she might be tranquil again. So much to do. Setting the house to rights, clearing the garden. Perhaps she would be tired enough to sleep. And spring would come, foaming with blossoms. The lazy little river would wake from its long winter sleep. Mother's rambler would bloom, a riot of shaded pink. The sun-dial again would mark the shining hours. She might be contented then. Write stories, perhaps. That would be fun. And a dog, a droll little ugly Scotch terrier. She would call him "Tam o'Shanter." A lively playmate to wander with her through the green New England hills . . .

Tramping with David . . . Her courage faltered. A wave of longing swept over her, drowning

the rose vines, the sundial, the droll little dream "Tam o' Shanter" . . . Never to see him again . . . David . . . She crumpled into a sobbing heap in the chintz-covered chair, a weary heap, lonely and lost and desolate.

A rap at the door roused her. She hastily dried her eyes and called a muffled "Come in."

It was Zeke.

"Somebody to see you, Miss Lisbeth."

"Who is it, Zeke?"

"A girl."

"Not a young lady? Zeke! You're forgetting your manners."

"No'm. Jes' a female pusson, dat's all."

"Tell her I'm busy. I can't come down."

"Please'm, Miss Lisabeth, she seems mighty anxious about it. Seems sort o' upsot in huh haid."

"Do you know her, Zeke? Did you ever see her before?"

"No'm, not as I knows on an' not meanin' no insult, Miss Lisbeth, but she do smell powerful strong."

A quick suspicion flashed into Elizabeth's mind. She sprang from the chair, crossed the room, pushed Zeke aside and ran along the upper hall. At the head of the stairs she paused. Her heart throbbed in her throat and things were swimming again. It might be a message from David! Her knees wobbled treacherously. Half way down the stairs she paused again. And then she saw her,

standing at the end of the hall where the sun through the fanlight fell in a yellow crescent, a drooping disheveled Amy, woebegone indeed, with red rimmed eyes and a round white face.

She looked up at the sound of Elizabeth's step on the polished stairs.

"It's Dave, Miss Lloyd," she said dully. "He's sick and I had to come."

❋ II ❋

"Will we make it, Jerry? See, it's quarter of six."

"If the wheels stick on, we'll make it all right . . . Shut up, Rags. There's no use your raisin' a fuss."

"What will you do with him, Jerry? They don't allow dogs in a hospital."

"Couldn't leave him behind. He'll want to see Davie. Rags is a good soldier too."

"The three musketeers! . . . There's the Twin River bridge. It's twenty miles from here . . . If only Wash had been back in time! . . . Oh Jerry, drive faster, please."

"I'll sneak him in under my coat . . . Shut up, old fellow. Be glad you ain't a giraffe . . . Hold on tight, my dear. There's a camel-back hump in this road."

"She said the doctor thought he'd be all right if only he'd try to get well . . . What's that pop-

ping? . . . Go on, anyway . . . The Jefferson hospital. Do you know where in Philadelphia that is? Can we find it, Jerry, all right?"

"Davie's a husky lad. Never was sick in his life . . . Hey there! Durn you, get out of the way!"

"They found him in a park. That terrible night of the storm. Pneumonia, she said. And he doesn't want to get well . . . This is Webertown . . . Step on it, Jerry. We don't seem to be moving at all."

"Pull out that gadget . . . That's better . . . So long as wheels stick on . . . Button your coat, young lady, or you'll be coughin' your head off, too."

"I'm not cold . . . We're going to David. We're going to see him again! . . . There's Riverton down there in the hollow and it's only a little past six . . . She lied to me Jerry. She and David never were married at all."

"Brazen young hussy! . . . Lord help us! One of the lights has burned out!"

"Never mind . . . I think I can understand. You see, Jerry, she loved him too. She thought he'd forget after while. But you don't forget. No matter how hard you try. I couldn't hate her . . . Couldn't hate anybody . . . I even love Grandmother now . . . Look out for that sign! . . . Whew, we scraped off the paint!"

"Any police in this durned town?"

"Who cares about them . . . We're going to David . . . He sent her to Atlantic City and she works there in a beauty shop. And he sent her money until she could earn enough for herself . . . But she never saw him and didn't know just exactly where he was . . . It's popping, Jerry! What if the thing explodes!"

"Pull that gadget again . . . Hey, get a move on there! This ain't no perade . . ! Davie'll be all right. Never was real bad sick in his life."

"Want me to drive? . . . I couldn't. I'm too excited . . . They found her address in his pocket . . . She went to see him and he thought it was I. That's why she came. Don't you see, Jerry. She loved him too. He'd been working on the wharves and was going to ship on a tanker. They found out that much . . . David was, Jerry. Dear big stupid! Going away from us all . . . The lights of the Junction . . . We'll make it . . . We'll make it yet."

"Come on, sister! Step along, pretty girl! . . . You'd think this critter could hear me. I'm used to talkin' to Lady . . . Godamighty, what's that?"

"It's a tire . . . Never mind . . . We can wobble on down the hill . . . There's the train, Jerry. See, it's going to take us to David . . . Leave the old car here. It's a pretty brave soldier too . . . I can carry my bag . . . You take Rags . . . But Jerry, you've lost your hat . . . Who cares? . . . Come on . . . We've made it . . .

Hush Rags! If the conductor hears you, you'll have a long walk back home . . . We're moving, Jerry! No, I'm all right. We're going, — to — see — David . . ."

❋ III ❋

"Beth . . ."

"Here I am, David. Right here close beside you."

"I dreamed — you had gone."

"Gone? Davie darling, I'll never leave you again."

"Where's Jerry?"

"In the nurse's chair . . . The doctor said he could stay . . . Poor old soldier, he's fast asleep."

"And Rags?"

"They led him off. To fumigate him, I think."

"That's good . . . Where's your hand? . . . Amy told you?"

"Yes, dear . . . Don't think about that."

"She's not a bad kid . . . Just never had a chance . . . I licked a guy for her once — Parker Todd."

"Oh . . . That's why you wouldn't tell me."

"I guess so. Made me feel foolish. Like Sir Galahad or something . . . Put your head here on the pillow . . . That's great . . . You have the loveliest hair . . . It was ghastly, Beth. Trying to live without you."

"I know . . . But you won't have to try any more."

"What did the doctor say?"

"That I was more potent than all his pills . . . He's young and he tried to flirt."

"I'll smash his head."

"No you won't . . . You'll get better as fast as you can. Then we'll go to Hopewell."

"Will you be there?"

"Try to lose me . . . You'll like it, Davie. There's a queer old house and a garden. Mother will spoil you and make you chicken broth . . . Jerry is coming for Christmas . . . Christmas in Hopewell, darling . . . There'll be snow and holly wreaths in the windows. We can cut our own Christmas tree."

"Sounds like heaven . . . I love you, Beth . . . Tell me some more . . . Before that nurse comes back."

"When you're well, we'll leave Mother there. With the capable cousin from Maine. You can build your bridges and I'll trail along. But there's one thing you really must promise."

"What is it?"

"Oh Davie darling, you must never be noble again."

"Crazy, wasn't it?"

"Silly, and stupid and brave."

"I couldn't bear you to be unhappy . . . My head's full of cobwebs . . . What happened to the old girl, Beth?"

"Grandmother? . . . I'll tell you some time . . . Now you must go to sleep."

"You won't leave me?"

"The doctor said I might stay."

"I don't trust him."

"You can trust me. I'll never leave you again . . . Walls are hateful, David. We can't see the stars."

"There's a star right here by my bed . . . Is that a chain, Beth, hanging around your neck?"

"It's the one you bought me last summer . . . You said it was gold like my eyes."

"Put the end of it here, around my neck . . . Now, you can't get away . . . Don't trust that doctor . . . I'll smash his head . . . That's the harness, Beth . . . A rickety wagon hitched to a beautiful star . . . You can't get away . . . Head's full of cobwebs . . . Sleepy . . . Good-night, my Beth."

"To-morrow, David."

"To-morrow, dear, to-morrow."

—THE END—